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The development of Hungarian language and literature

In his thought-provoking paper, Margócsy (1996) states that Hungarian language and literature have always been regarded as the most important subject. In fact, 'Hungarian language and literature' has been the *two* most important subjects throughout Hungary's education history. At any Hungarian university, majoring in Hungarian implies taking courses in two schools: The School of Hungarian Literature and the School of Hungarian Linguistics.

How did this situation arise? Explaining the history of the development of the subject, Margócsy divides it into the following periods:

The 'rhetoric' period from the mid-18th to the mid-19th century

From the Middle Ages up to the early 19th century, Latin was the language of instruction in Hungary. In schools during the mid-18th century, the Hungarian language was used only in Hungarian lessons, and taught only if Hungarian was one of the subjects. In 1790, Diet passed a law that Hungarian Departments should be established in every university. Soon after, the first Hungarian Language and Literature Department was established at the University of Pest in 1791. Since 1806, Hungarian has been a compulsory subject in every secondary school, college and university. This occurred at a time when Hungary was a multiethnic society. Since a mere 40.5 per cent of the population spoke Hungarian as their first language (1851 census), teaching Hungarian meant to teach it as a second language to Hungarian citizens with a different first language. For native speakers, the main objective of teaching Hungarian was to enable them to use the 'educated, literary register' of the language in science and literature as a replacement for Latin. The goals of teaching Hungarian as a second language and as a native tongue did not overlap, nor did they exclude each other.

Among the goals of teaching the Hungarian language, the primary goal was set in response to a patriotic urge to spread Hungarian among the other nationalities of the Hungarian Kingdom (within the Hapsburg Empire). The rationale behind this concept was that by teaching Hungarian to non-Hungarian minorities you would assimilate them into the Hungarian nation. In an attempt to describe the situation in 1810, the Chair of the Hungarian Department of the University of Pest started his inaugural lecture with the following words: 'Too few of us speak Hungarian,' and asserted that every university student should be taught Hungarian (Czinke, 1810, cited in Margócsy, 1996).

In the 19th century, the concept of teaching a language included the teaching of its culture as well. Culture was considered the foundation of 'national education' as well as the tool through which to comprehend science and poetry. Thus grammar, poetics, rhetoric and literature were all integrated into language teaching, with Latin being the model for teaching Hungarian. The method of the day was the Grammar–Translation Method, which laid a strong emphasis on the correct use of the written language.

Although the limitations of the Grammar–Translation Method are all too obvious today, an approach that regarded poetry as the pinnacle of language use proved beneficial for the teaching of Hungarian literature. The first anthology for secondary school students, edited by István Tatay, was published in 1847. It quotes exclusively contemporary authors, including modern poets and outstanding orators of the time (e.g. Mihály Vörösmarty, Sándor Petőfi, Lajos Kossuth).

The 'historical' period: The second half of the 19th century

In the aftermath of the 1848–1849 Revolution and War of Independence, Hungarian as a school subject underwent two major transformations. One concerned the separation of the teaching of the language from the teaching of its literature. By identifying the learning of the Hungarian language exclusively with the study of grammar, literature was ousted from language lessons, and was dealt with separately in literature classes. The other change was due to a concept, widespread in the early 19th century, which brought the historical development of literature and linguistics into focus. This historical approach implied that literature equalled the *history* of literature whereas in linguistics the main emphasis fell on Finno-Ugrian comparative linguistics and language history. The two disciplines (literature and linguistics) became too divergent to be contained within the confines of a single department. At the University of Pest, the Hungarian Department split into two: The Department of Linguistics and the Department of Literature. Paradoxically, in teacher training a different approach to Hungarian was taking shape around the same time. In 1875, the Hungarian Royal Teacher Training School (*Magyar Királyi Tanárképezde*) designed the structure of Hungarian as a subject – this structure is considered valid to this day. It aimed at ‘unity in duality’ by training teachers-to-be both in Hungarian Grammar and in the History of Literature, without paying proper heed to the interrelation of the two components.

Teaching Hungarian as a means of ideological manipulation up to the 1970s

During the 20th century, two consecutive anti-democratic social systems exploited the teaching of Hungarian for their own purposes. From the 1920s until World War II, the central curriculum for secondary schools stipulated that the main objective of teaching Hungarian language and literature was to convey and inculcate strict morals, national pride and patriotic feelings. Hungarian literary works were shown to present a model to children, while language teaching focussed on basic grammar rules and emphasised the idea that good patriots ought to use ‘appropriate’ Hungarian.

During the harshest years of Stalinism (1950s), the method of direct ideological manipulation remained, but its contents altered significantly with the compulsory reading list drastically curtailed: only authors professing ‘progressive’ ideas were included in the curriculum. Hungarian language instruction was largely neglected, its only concern being that the traditional standards of grammatical correctness were to be preserved, and that the native language was to be protected from inimical foreign influences.

Up to the mid-1960s, ‘Hungarian language and literature’ in schools meant separate lessons in literature and language but one grade in the school report books. To increase the weight of language classes, linguists suggested that students receive separate marks in the two subjects. The idea was implemented – and unwittingly it dealt a final blow to the erstwhile unity of ‘Hungarian language and literature’.

The 'aesthetic' period from the 1970s

As a reaction to the political manipulations of the preceding decades, new teaching concepts were formulated from the mid-seventies that changed the focus of both literature and language teaching.

In literature, literary works were no longer analysed by the place they were assigned in the history of Hungarian literature but by their aesthetic functions and literary merits, while in Hungarian language teaching the communicative function of the language was given top priority.

These changes precipitated heated debates between the supporters of a more traditional way of teaching language and literature and teachers who preferred the aesthetic approach to the historical approach. Poetry and rhetoric returned to the curriculum but within the framework of literature classes. In both subjects, considerable effort has been made to bring them closer to the state-of-the-art literature and up-to-date linguistic research and achievements. Nonetheless, little has been attained in relating Hungarian language and literature to each other.

Teaching materials

Literature textbooks

Traditional Hungarian education has always preferred coursebooks of a positivist approach, based on the lives of the authors rather than on their work. The new textbooks published after World War II were ideologically biased and served the purposes of the monolithic, centrally planned curriculum.

The year 1979 was a turning point in the teaching of literature in Hungary: The first volume of a radically new set of secondary school coursebooks was published during this year. The authors, literary scholars of international renown, focussed on the aesthetic merits and the in-depth analyses of literary works (Ritoók *et al.*, 1979).

From 1980 on, new curricula and coursebooks to supplement the centrally issued textbooks were written. The most significant of these, developed by Zsolnai (1982), has been an optional curriculum with the accompanying coursebooks. Zsolnai's 'language–literature–communication' programme lays a special emphasis on developing skills of verbal communication through drama techniques. In addition, to stimulate children's interest in reading, the programme provides them with works of top quality literature from the age of six.

The political changes of 1989 brought about a boom in coursebook writing and publishing; as a result, teachers have a free choice to select the book they think serves their goals best. A new concept concentrating on skills development and creativity in the teaching of literature has been elaborated.

Hungarian Language textbooks

The structure of the Hungarian Language textbooks used at school after 1945 was as follows: phonetics, parts of speech (including morphology) and syntax. To facilitate students'

improvement in spelling, it was considered logical to teach morphology prior to dealing with syntax. Stylistics, rhetoric and poetics were omitted. As a result of a proposal to include language cultivation and stylistics in the curriculum, a coursebook of stylistics was published in 1964.

The 1980s witnessed a change in first language education. Morphology and spelling lost priority to the new approach based on communication theory. Based on Zsolnai's 'language – literature – communication' programme, new coursebooks were introduced. The grammar books were inspired by the transformational–generative approach and applied grammar discovery techniques. Bánréti's alternative programme (1991), *Nyelvtan – kommunikáció – irodalom tizenéveseknek* (Grammar – Communication – Literature for Teenagers), is also based on the transformational–generative approach and includes the study of pragmatics. Szende's book (1993), *A magyar nyelv tankönyve* (A Textbook of Hungarian Language), deals with the history of the language, the language family of Hungarian, stylistics, rhetoric and the issue of minority language use. Furthermore, a new programme for first language education (1988-1995) was developed for students of teacher-training colleges, specialising in the education of 6- to 12-year-olds. The five volumes skillfully combine traditional grammar with the latest theories of modern linguistics.

The effectiveness of instruction

Although Hungarian Language and Literature is one of the compulsory subjects in the school-leaving examination (*érettségi*), no extensive research has been done yet evaluate and compare students' level of proficiency in the four language skills. In a remarkable study, Horváth (1998) carried out a validity survey in the domain of first language use among three different groups of society: Young adults with school-leaving examination, school teachers and business managers.¹¹ First, the author examined the content, task types and assessment methods of the school-leaving examination and their validity in present-day society. After mapping both the informants' performance and deficiencies in first language use, she concluded that the most problematic areas for all three groups were public speech and formal writing. Lacking the necessary skills in these fields, informants often expressed frustration and a desire to obtain knowledge and skills through formal training. The results, the author argued, may be due to the fact that in Central and East Europe two principal paradigms have been identified in the first language and literary education: The 'tradition oriented' and the 'pragmatic' approach. For historical reasons, the former was more dominant until as late as 1989. Along with the rapid and basic social changes, there has been a pressing need for a more pragmatic oriented way of teaching Hungarian language and literature. Its goal would be to strike a balance between traditional and pragmatic approaches, thus meeting a social demand.

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