



Review on Réka Máté's PhD dissertation  
on

## Individual Varieties of Language Maintenance: The Example of Transcarpathian Hungarians

by

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The historical, linguistic, economic, geographical, political and educational factors influencing the life of Hungarians in Transcarpathia has been the topic of several studies but no study included all possible factors to explore the interplay between them. Réka Máté's research took a holistic approach to describe the language maintenance of Hungarians living in a settlement with bi- and multilingual population. The changing political and language political environment makes the context of the study very complex but the author managed to integrate these changes into the dissertation. The qualitative approach used in the study allowed for the exploration of the factors of language maintenance not only cross-sectionally but throughout the different periods in the last decades. Apart from the minor shortcomings mentioned in this review, the dissertation presents valuable results about the community of Zhnyatino and raises further questions about the future of its people and their language. The literature review is comprehensive and the methodology is well-chosen as well as the analyses of the results. In the next part of the review, the critical remarks are listed following the chapter structure.

### Chapter 1. Introduction

The chapter includes a general introduction, rationale of the study, research questions and chapter structure.

The author describes how widespread and beneficial multilingualism is, however, in many bi- and multilingual contexts the (top-down) monolingual view still prevails, including the context of the study, Transcarpathia. The novelty and significance of the study is highlighted by the unique research design, namely a combination of the sociolinguistic and anthropological approach. Another strong point of the dissertation which could be highlighted more, is the exploration of individual multilingualism and societal multilingualism. This latter point should be stressed more in further publications as few studies include both levels. The research questions are also presented in this chapter. I understand the highly qualitative nature of the research, but I think the modification of the wording of RQ2 could make the question clearer and more objective (Its present form: *Despite all the odds, how were different members of this community able to preserve their bilingual state?*). To understand the first part of the question, the reader has to be aware of the complex historical, linguistic, political, etc. situation in Transcarpathia.

*The aim of this thesis is to present, how the bilingual state of a small Transcarpathian community has been maintained over the years, through the real-life examples taken from some of its residents. – Is it bilingual?*



## Chapter 2.

The dissertation presents an excellent overview of the literature, several definitions of the relevant concepts are listed, however, the standpoint of the author is not always clear. For example, definitions of bilingualism are given by different authors and many of them include multilingualism within the umbrella term of bilingualism. The author probably agrees that bilingualism and multilingualism are not only quantitatively but also qualitatively different concepts, however, only one sentence is added about the difference between the two and no further arguments (*According to more recent developments in research, the term multilingualism has been suggested to be used as the cover term for the acquisition and use of more than two languages* (Jessner, 2006)). This suggests that in the dissertation bilingualism and multilingualism are the same.

Throughout the dissertation ‘multilingualism’ is the dominant term, however, in the research questions and in several sections regarding the target community, the ‘bilingual’ term is used. By the end of the dissertation, the reader understands the complexity of the linguistic picture, but it would have been worthwhile to clarify from the beginning where, for what and in what sense the author uses these two terms. This would be especially important and interesting because RQ3 also triggers us to clarify the context, because according to this there is multilingualism at the individual level but bilingualism at the community level (*Looking at different life stories, what does individual multilingualism look like in a bilingual community?*)

Section 2.2. discusses the main concepts of the dissertation: the multilingual speaker (holistic view and multicompetence), verbal repertoires, language maintenance in relation to shift and loss, multilingual communities, family language policy and some multilingual instructional approaches. The overview remains mainly at the conceptual level and only a few previous studies are mentioned. Are you aware of other studies besides Susan Gal’s that used a similar approach to study language maintenance?

The dissertation argues for the DMM as the right analytical framework for the analyses of individual and societal multilingualism. I cannot agree more as it accounts for the different factors playing a role in multilingual development, it allows for positive and negative growth and takes dynamic changes into consideration.

In the review of the DMM, there is an unfinished argument about semilingualism. Here the author refers to Hansegård (1962) and gives several examples of semilingualism then finishes the paragraph with the following claim: ‘*However, it has to be noted that most linguists have come to dismiss semilingualism as a scientifically flawed concept (see Salö & Karlander, 2018)*’. If we check, Salö & Karlander (2018) in their article write about a case in Swedish politics when a Moderate party politician warned against mother tongue instruction, and claimed that „MTI should be abolished since it deprives minority children of "sufficient knowledge of the Swedish language" and puts them "at risk of becoming semilingual" (Salö & Karlander, 2018: 247). Then the authors overview the history of semilingualism and end their discussion with the following:

It is, hence, as instructive as it is humbling to remember Bachelard's (1938/2002,19) assertion that "[e]ven in a clear mind there are dark areas, caverns still haunted by shades, and traces of the old remain in our new ways of thinking."

As it does not become clear from the argument in the dissertation: What is your or the DMM’s standpoint in connection to semilingualism? Do you agree that the term is harmful?

Section 2.3 (*Hungarians in Transcarpathia*) describes the demographic composition of Transcarpathia, as well as the relevant historical events, political and language political



decisions. Unfortunately, the latest and only census in Transcarpathia was organised in 2001, more than two decades ago and since then as a result of several sociological, economic and other factors the demographic composition of Transcarpathia has changed. In order to gain some more recent data, survey and interview research has been conducted since 2016 (e. g. TANDEM and SUMMA) and the results are summarised in the book edited by Ferenc and Kovály (2020) ([https://bgazrt.hu/wp-content/uploads/NPKI\\_konyvek/karpatalja\\_mozgasban\\_beliv.pdf](https://bgazrt.hu/wp-content/uploads/NPKI_konyvek/karpatalja_mozgasban_beliv.pdf)). Among other things, the book includes information about population decrease in the different settlements (including Zhnyatino) and the factors playing a role in the process, such as seasonal migration (later mentioned in Section 5.1.5.7.). This could have been added to the dissertation.

### **Chapter 3. Context of the study**

This chapter describes the demographic and linguistic composition of the settlement (3.1.) and the analyses of its linguistic landscape (3.2.). As promised in the Introduction (3.1.1.), the chapter helps the reader to hear and see the linguistic environment of Zhnyatino through pictures, legislations and the voices of its people and understand how the different languages coexist (separated or mixed) in public spaces, churches, cemeteries, offices, shops, schools, etc. The qualitative analyses shows a holistic picture of the place and it is a very enjoyable read.

Section 3.1.2. (*A multilingual community in Transcarpathia*) lacks cohesion as it jumps from the settlement to the greater area of Transcarpathia then back again; there is also a map (Map 2) of the language borders but not referenced in the text. Furthermore, the discussion on dialect borders is more distracting than contributing.

The rest of this chapter is dedicated to the linguistic landscape analyses. Generally, research results are put into the Results section, but in this case the presented pictures contribute to the description of the context of the study and from the reader's point of view it was a good choice. It is disrupting though to read about the theoretical and methodological background of LL studies in Section 3.2.1., it could have been better placed in the previous chapter (Chapter 2).

The text is well-organised and easy to follow with the LL pictures, however, in academic texts figures, tables and pictures should always be referred to by their numbers (e. g. *see Picture 5*) and not by positions, (e.g. *the picture below*). See Dissertation Guidelines, page 3 (<https://mds.htk.uni-pannon.hu/en/dokumentumok-kezelese/english-documents/training-documents-of-phd-students/143-dissertation-guidelines-2/file>).

### **Chapter 4. The study**

The choice of qualitative research methodology, and grounded theory in particular, is very brave from a researcher at the beginning of her career as she has to „derive theories or explanations directly from empirical data, allowing concepts and theories to emerge from the data rather than being imposed upon it” (p.50). While in quantitative research (usually) there are hypotheses to refute and confirm, there are pre-defined categories where data can be put and the analyses is straightforward, in qualitative, and in this case, highly exploratory research, there is nothing but the research questions, and the researcher has to use her knowledge of the literature to identify patterns. The chosen approach is challenging. However, answering such holistic research questions require holistic approaches which are usually qualitative: in this research these are interviews, observations and field notes. Therefore, the choice of methodology is well-motivated. Interview analyses and coding is also well-explained. It is not clear whether a second rater was included for coding to ensure reliability.



It is also unclear how the list of questions was created. It would have been useful to describe the process of interview questions development, that is, how the different parts of the interview connect to the theoretical background discussed in the literature review. I hope this question will be answered during the public viva. Was there a specific list of questions used in the expert interviews too?

## Chapter 5. Results

This chapter is divided into two parts, Section 5.1. in the light of the results discusses the social factors playing a role in language maintenance and Section 5.2. focuses on individual factors using the DMM as a framework. Given the qualitative nature of the study and the author's perspectives, the whole chapter is easy and enjoyable to read and follow. The excerpts from the interviews complement the discussion and in order to put some social issues in perspective, some previous studies are also discussed in this chapter. Therefore, a better heading for this chapter could be Results and Discussion.

In the following some critical remarks will be listed on chapter 5.

Section 5.1. presents the social themes found in the data, such as the role of culture, changes in the state language, military service, family language policy, education and seasonal migration in language maintenance. Besides the description of the historical changes and the present situation, the end of the section also gives some "predictions" for the future through the voices of the participants.

What is the role of Section 5.1.1. (*Mother tongue, ethnicity, identity*)? No data is presented on these topics in this section.

In Section 5.1.3. (*Does bilingualism equal biculturalism?*) the author cites Grosjean on individual biculturalism, however, the excerpts from the interviews only cover celebrations and religious events in the community (i. e. at the societal level). Based on the interviews, can you find any other element(s) of culture where the principles of biculturalism can be detected (see Grosjean's (1993; 2008; 2015) definition of biculturalism below)?

Firstly, they take part, to varying degrees, in the life of two or more cultures. Secondly, they adapt, at least in part, their attitudes, behaviours, values, languages, etc., to these cultures. Thirdly, they combine and blend aspects of the cultures involved. Certain characteristics (attitudes, beliefs, values, behaviours, etc.) come from the one or the other culture, whereas other characteristics are blends based on these cultures. In this latter case, it becomes difficult to determine the cultural origin of a particular characteristic since it contains aspects of both cultures.

Figure 1 and Figure 2 are results of the code relationship analyses done in the Atlas.ti software and they both show seemingly interesting associations between codes but no explanation or reference is given to the figures in the text. This way the figures cannot be treated as part of the results since they are not integrated or interpreted in the dissertation.

Section 5.2. focuses on the individual factors of language maintenance through the lens of the DMM. To my knowledge, the model has not been used in purely qualitative research on interview data yet but it seemed helpful in explaining some of the phenomena raised by the interviewees.

In Section 5.3. a revolutionary solution is chosen to present and summarize the language composition of the settlement by a language map. This could definitely serve as a starting point for depicting further changes in a longitudinal study if the author plans to continue.



## Chapter 6. Discussion and Conclusion

The 8 pages long chapter discusses the results in the framework of sustainable multilingualism through the main themes emerged from the interviews. Unfortunately, sustainable multilingualism is not mentioned in the literature review (Chapter 2) at all which makes the cohesion between Chapter 2 and Chapter 6 weak. The role of the discussion should be to discuss the results in the light of previous (theoretical and empirical) studies, this way connecting the literature review and the discussion. Therefore, in future publications it is recommended to introduce the term already in the literature review.

As mentioned earlier, the discussion follows the main themes and not the order of the research questions, therefore, the answers to the RQs are scattered in the text and not straightforward.

The dissertation ends with a 21 pages Reference list rich in international and Transcarpathian publications and the Appendices.

Language and form: The dissertation follows the standards of academic writing.

On the basis of the above considerations, I can conclude that this dissertation presents an original piece of research on a timely and important topic in an under-researched context, therefore, I think that the dissertation fully meets the requirements of a PhD degree.

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