

In: Zoltán Vajda, ed. 2009. *Kultúrán innen és túl, Within and without culture: Írások Rozsnyai Bálint tiszteletére, Essays in honor of Bálint Rozsnyai*. Szeged: JATE Press, 125–128.

**On the importance of (American) English:
A personal and linguistic note dedicated to Bálint Rozsnyai**

Anna Fenyvesi

Perceptions of the importance (or unimportance) of (American) English have greatly shaped me in my development as an academic and a scholar from as early as my high school years. It is because these perceptions have been so deeply embedded in the respective eras historically and perhaps ideologically and can serve as their emblems, and also because Bálint's perception of the importance of American English (and of the United States) as the focus of academic and scholarly interest was especially of great influence on me that I think an account of them is worth sharing here.

The first snapshot is from the spring of 1980, almost a decade before the change of regimes in Hungary. As a student unable to make an influential decision at the age of 14 about what academic course to follow in high school and, most likely, determine the rest of my life, I enrolled in a class in one of Szeged's leading high schools where we had to choose a specialization only from the 3rd year on. In the 2nd year there was a feeling of competition in the air, since those specializations where there were at least four or five applicants would take off, and teachers teaching in them would have academically driven and promising students to work with. There were exactly four of us wanting to specialize in English, and one day the principal came to class to talk especially to us. I thought he would be supportive of our interests and possibly try and recruit more students for the specialization – I had experienced only support of academic and extracurricular interests in my high school until then. But no, the principal came to discourage us from wanting to specialize in English: “English has no future at all”, he said then, in February 1980. The others quickly signed up for other specializations, and I also had to follow suit. Reluctantly, I decided to specialize in Hungarian and History, as the next closest thing to English from among the available options. I knew that what the principal had said could not possibly be true and was quietly amazed and baffled by his motivations for saying and, probably, actually thinking this.

The next snapshot is from five years later, in the spring of 1985. Despite being side-tracked by studying history and Hungarian a great deal, I had successfully made it into the Szeged arts faculty, majoring in English and Russian and was in my 3rd year by this time. In 1985 a new option was launched at our English department: a possibility to take up American Studies as a 2-year specialization for anyone majoring in English. This was the first specialization like this offered at any of the English departments in Hungary, a novel initiative, the result of many years of efforts by the then head of the department, Bálint Rozsnyai. He firmly believed in and propagated the importance of studying the culture, history, literature and language of the United States at a time when nobody else in Hungary was motivated and active enough to change university curriculums to accommodate for such studies at all. This certainly communicated to us students that – at least in our department head's opinion – (American) English had a future after all.

Out of a year consisting of about two dozen English majors, three of us signed up and went for this unique academic experience of focusing on things American (history, intellectual

history, and literature) and choosing a concentration in a well thought out course of study rather than fragmenting our time and efforts between unrelated courses. In addition to getting our departmental faculty teach courses with an American focus, Bálint brought in academics from Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest just for the three of us, to widen the range of offerings. Doing this specialization became one of the best academic and scholarly experiences of my undergraduate years due to the high quality of the course of study in the specialization as well as the amount of personal scholarly attention we were lucky to receive. I am proud to say that, partly to my relatively prominent place in the alphabetical list of graduating students, I was the first person in Szeged to receive a degree in English with specialization in American Studies.

Despite having written an MA thesis in American literature under Bálint's supervision (and combining my interest in things Russian and American in the choice of the analysis of one of Nabokov's American novels), I became a linguist rather than a scholar of literature, but my studies in the American specialization shaped me forever: in addition to going to get my PhD at an American university, I have also become a linguist with a great professional interest in American English in general and American dialects in particular, as well as in the multilingualism of the USA, and of the language of American Hungarians.

The last snapshot is from this year, 2009, when my PhD students and I received probably the most surprising and unexpected results I have ever got when we carried out a sociolinguistic survey of attitudes of minority Hungarian students from Slovakia, Romania and Serbia to the various languages they speak – their first language, Hungarian (both Hungary Hungarian and also their local variety of it); their second language, Slovak, Romanian, or Serbian, respectively; and English, their first foreign language learned at school, specifically, three varieties of it, American English, British English, and Hungarian-accented (i.e. non-native speaker) English. The study was run as a part of the LINEE project, a large international sociolinguistic research project studying multilingualism in Europe and funded by the European Union under the FP6 scheme that some of my colleagues, PhD students from Szeged's PhD program in English Applied Linguistics and I are involved in right now.¹

We used an indirect method of measuring language attitudes called the matched guise technique,² eliciting students' evaluations of speakers of the tested language varieties for characteristics traditionally called *status traits* – i.e. characteristics to do with competence and social standing such as *educated/uneducated*, *successful/unsuccessful*, *rich/poor*, *ambitious/unmotivated*, *prominent/average*, and *confident/not confident* – vs. *solidarity traits* – i.e. traits regarding personal integrity and social standing such as *honest/dishonest*, *reliable/unreliable*, *likeable/dislikeable*, *nice/unpleasant*, *generous/selfish*, and *interesting/boring*.³ Typical results of such attitudes studies are usually that speakers of high prestige varieties are rated more positively on status traits than speakers of, for instance, a minority variety, while the opposite holds with regard to evaluations on solidarity traits.

Our primary and high school student subjects – about half of them 13-14-year-olds and the other half 17-18-year-olds – totaled almost 1,000 (990 to be precise) and were uniformly students attending schools with Hungarian as the language of instruction. The subjects had to subjectively evaluate the speakers they heard one by one, on all of the above traits.

¹ Project number 028388; <http://www.linee.info/>.

² Lambert (1967), Fasold (1984), Giles and Coupland (1991), Milroy and Preston (1999) etc.

³ Edwards (1999).

Their evaluations of the English speakers they provided – especially those of the American English speaker – stunned us all.⁴ The three English speakers were rated statistically significantly more positively than all the other speakers on all of the status traits (with the only exception of the feature *confident*, on which the Hungary Hungarian speaker was rated more positively than the Hungarian-accented English speaker, equally positively as the British speaker, but less positively than the American speaker). The American and the British speakers were also rated statistically significantly more positively than all the other speakers on half of the solidarity traits (namely, on *likeable*, *nice*, and *interesting*), with only *honest* and *generous* being those features on which the Hungary Hungarian speaker was rated higher than both, and with *reliable* being the one feature where the Hungary Hungarian speaker was rated higher than the British speaker but lower than the American. As for a comparison of the evaluations of the two native speakers of English: the American English speaker was rated higher than the British speaker on all of the traits, status or solidarity, except *educated* (on which they were rated equally positively). At the same time, students rated their respective majority language the most negatively (which is hardly a surprising finding for Hungarian minorities in the Carpathian Basin these days), and their regional variety of Hungarian very negatively as well. On the average, Hungary Hungarian was rated more positively than regional Hungarian but more negatively than the English varieties.

Our findings are very recent and will take some more time to process in all detail and in all depth. But one thing is certain: English, and especially American English, has outstanding and overwhelming prestige among minority Hungarian students today. These students' perception of the importance of English in relation to their first language is clearly biased and skewed, but it is still an important signal regarding the status of English in Central Europe in 2009.

If I once again look at my snapshots from 1980 and 1985, it is clear whose prediction and view about the importance of English was the correct one, Bálint's. I am profoundly happy and grateful that he positively influenced my life in so many important ways.

References:

- Edwards, John. 1999. Refining our understanding of language attitudes. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 18:101–110.
- Fenyvesi, Anna. 2009. *Language attitudes in a minority context: Minority Hungarian students' attitudes to their minority language, the state language, and English as a foreign language*. Paper presented at the 12th International Conference on Minority Languages, May 28-30, 2009, Tartu, Estonia.
- Fenyvesi, Anna, Zsuzsanna Dégi, Zsuzsanna Kiss, István Rabec, Christina Reissner, Veronica Irsara, and Paul Videsott. 2009. *2nd Working Paper of Work Package WP9a*. LINEE ms.
- Fasold, Ralph. 1984. Language attitudes. In: Fasold, Ralph, ed. *The sociolinguistics of society*. Oxford: Blackwell, 147–179.
- Giles, Howard and Nikolas Coupland. 1991. *Language: Contexts and consequences*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Milroy, Lesley, and Dennis R. Preston. 1999. Introduction. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 18:4–9.

⁴ Cf. Fenyvesi et al. (2009), and Fenyvesi (2009).

