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At the border and beyond

Identification strategies of minorities¹



ABSTRACT

Over the last half century, there has been an empirically perceptible rapid change and change of direction in social and linguistic processes. Our world has become more interactive, the flow of information has become faster, and communication technology is constantly evolving. The accelerated processes, evolution of history and culture of minority groups in families and mixed marriages result in the loss of language, which can lead to an identity crisis.

The purpose of the study is to present, through a process – from the 1960s to the present days – how one dimension, that is language, has formed the identity of couples living in mixed marriages in Vojvodina and also the members of Romani women's community in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county as well as what similarities and differences can be discovered in the lives of the two minority groups. Our research has concluded that opening up mobility channels significantly accelerates assimilation and language loss.

KEYWORDS

dual identity, minority, loss of language, assimilation, mixed marriage, Romanies, Vojvodina Hungarians

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INTRODUCTION

The study deals with the identity of couples living in a mixed marriage in Vojvodina and of Romani women living in a small settlement in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County. It presents the characteristics of the identity of the two minority groups along different life paths, trying to uncover the factors that help or destroy the identity of those living in a minority situation.

In today's information society, national and ethnic identities are undergoing constant changes. On the one hand, old, earlier versions of identity remain, while on the other, new types appear. Globalization and modernization are radically changing the way in which identity is preserved and developed. (SCHÖPFLIN 1998. 15–27) We have to deal with historical traumas, prejudices and stereotypes that are present in the minds of minority groups and also affect their adaptation to new opportunities (HÓDI 2006). Therefore, in the world of globalization and integration, it is very urgent to take into consideration the opportunities of these two minority groups – mixed couples from Vojvodina and Romani women – to conduct a situation assessment. The results of such studies can contribute to understanding the trends of change within minority identities and put us on the road to new tasks and course of actions.

The identity of most minority groups is linked to the mother tongue, so the focus of this study is on language as an identity-building dimension, as well as on attitudes towards the mother tongue, linguistic attitudes, and language loss. In the introductory part of the study, we present the purpose of the research and then proceed to a brief theoretical dimension, where, after briefly introducing the significance of identity, we introduce two alternative strategies, the concepts of dual identity and assimilation. In the next part of the thesis, the research method – the selection of settlements, research method, sample – will be presented, and the results of the interviews will be extracted. To conclude the study, we outline the identities and differences between the two minority groups and synthesize the changes within their linguistic dimension, taking into account the different historical, legal, and cultural backgrounds of the two countries.

1. PURPOSE OF STUDY

The main purpose of the research underlying this study is to explore the identity patterns of married mixed couples in Vojvodina and Romani women, as well as the identity strategies they represent in 3 eras. The Romanians and Hungarians of Vojvodina are the largest minorities in the particular country, therefore it is important to know how their identity is formed and how much they are assimilating. No such comparative study has been conducted so far.

The processes of modernization and globalization have not only transformed the majority society but have also affected the lives of members of minority groups. In a changed environment, traditions and values that define the daily life of the community also get a different meaning. The study seeks to find out how the newly opened mobility channels affect the lives of minorities. Women have a key role to play in passing on old and new values, as they enable the growing generation to integrate into society. However, it is not easy for Gypsy women to fulfil this function, while external environmental changes are fundamentally transforming the role of Gypsy women within the community. Examining the identity of Romani women is particularly important for social co-existence, as they are the ones who ensure the transmission of traditions to the next generation and, on the other hand, they play a central role in integrating into the majority society. For this, however, it is necessary to review the concepts related to identity.

2. THE FORMATION OF IDENTITY

We interpret ourselves and our belonging to others – to varying degrees, depending on the social context – through values, beliefs, and behaviours from the past. The process of identity formation can never start from scratch, it is always based on the set of pre-existing symbols that underlie identity. When defining identity, we can start from two theses. In one case, the term identity can be interpreted as answering questions like “*where I belong to and who am I?*”. Answers to these questions will also help to find the way around “*where I do not belong to and who am I not?*”. Another case is that the expression of identity not only defines the individual, but also has qualitative content, so that members of a given group can identify members with the same identity. It follows that identity consists of separate symbols, attributes defining identity, which also have a function of distinguishing identity (HOMISINOVÁ 2008).

Tajfel’s theory of social identity, in the concept of the self, distinguishes between *individual identity*, which is self-definition and relation to others, as well as *social identity* in which the individual is a member of a group, community that has its own history and common destiny (TAJFEL 1981. 255).

The social identity is a mechanism, which is filled with content in intergroup relationships, discriminations, and comparisons (BREWER–PICKET 2006), so for this reason, because of the discrimination and feelings of inferiority among members of minority groups, the identity of the group members may be distorted and later these may be incorporated into their self-image and self-esteem (BREACKWELL 1993). It is difficult for members of a minority group to develop a secure identity, as they often encounter social rejection, which leaves a mark on their self-esteem. For this reason, it is important to get to know minority identity, because in the absence of a secure identity, their self-esteem will be lowered, and their coping strategies may be distorted. (CATANESE–TICE 2006, PICKET–GARDNER 2006)

3. DUAL IDENTITY

Identity construction is accomplished through intra-group and inter-group relationships and feedback. Acquiring ethnic and national identity is a cognitive learning process. Whether individuals are members of an ethnic or national community, positive evaluations, and participation in them are essential for the development of their identity. Through coexistence, shared experiences become accessible to all members of society. (BINDORFFER 2001)

The Hungarian nation, for example, has been offering the Gypsies positive patterns which can be followed for centuries, and they have had the opportunity to share some experiences too. Gypsies are both members of an ethnic group and of the Hungarian nation. Ethnic group membership gives them the opportunity to positively live and represent their own ethnic identity. The Hungarian national membership offers them further positive identification patterns. At the same time, ethnic and national identities intersect each other across multiple dimensions, resulting in a dual sense of identity. However, the construction of identity, which is the result of the intersection of ethnic and national dimensions, evolves over a given situation, space, and time. They are always situational in nature and will be arranged along the most favourable identification. The placement of the identity representation in the background or foreground is always determined by the given place and time. Dual identity involves both the search for common features and the direction of separation. Gypsies are trying to mix and separate at the same time, maintaining certain parts of their traditions, while adopting the values and behavioural patterns of the majority society at the same time. According to BINDORFFER (2001), the elements, spaces, and principles of ethnic and national identity are distinguished but they coexist and *“become operational in due course (...) depending on the response to a given situation”* (BELL 1975. 153).

Dual identity is therefore a personalized combination of identity elements from different sources, the essence of which is to complement, balance, and provide stability to adjacent identity constructs. Of course, the direction of movement towards each element is influenced by the determination of economic, social, political interests, or the place of individuals in the social division of labor and their education.

4. ASSIMILATION

The concept of assimilation is closely linked to national identity and identification because assimilation itself is a form of identification, a change in our identity. In identification, we define ourselves, which is a process of comparison with others, whom I resemble to and differ from. Assimilation works similarly: the individual abandons his/her previous identity or certain elements of it and identifies with another group (PARK 1955, GORDON 1964). In common language, assimilation is usually associated with the violent or non-violent merging of national minorities. This includes the content of the concept, but its overall meaning is more subtle. In the broadest sense, it refers to the integration into a group or structure, as well as the incorporation of the values and norms of the particular group (GORDON 1964).

There are basically two strategies for minority-majority relations: segregation and cultural adoption. The segregated minority is alienated from the majority society and is not part of the social structural system and is also territorially isolated (VAN KEMPEN – SULE ÖZÜEKREN 1998). From the point of view of national identity, cultural adoption can be interpreted as adopting the tradition of another nation. This process can be done by retaining one's own identity (integration) or by exchanging one's identity (assimilation). The most fundamental difference between assimilation and integration can be defined here. In the process of assimilation, a given nation integrates into the social structure system, but in return gives up its own language, customs, culture, and national identity as a whole (GORDON 1964). In contrast, in the process of integration, a given minority integrates into the social structure system while preserving its own national identity (DRACHSLER 1921). The segregated minority is isolated from the majority society and usually lives in much worse conditions than the majority nation. The assimilating minority assimilates into the majority nation and gradually ceases to exist. An integrated minority, on the other hand, does not merge into the majority society, but preserves its language and identity, and does not segregate, but is successfully integrated into the social structure system.

There are basically three possible approaches to the relationship between minority and majority: segregation, assimilation, and integration, and in the case of assimilation, we can talk about mixing and full adaptation.

Segregation		The minority is markedly separated from the majority society and is not part of the social structure. It is often accompanied by territorial segregation and marginalization.
Assimilation	Full adaptation	The minority is part of the social structure but loses its national identity and language. In the long run, the minority is completely merged into the majority and ceases to exist as an independent nation.
	Mixing	The minority is part of the social structure, partly losing its national identity and language. It takes over parts of the majority nation's identity, thus creating a new identity. It can create a new national identity, or it can be one of the stages of total assimilation, where a minority loses its identity by elements, eventually becoming completely identified with the majority.
Integration		The minority is part of the social structure, not marginalized, but retains its own national identity.

If we look for the simplest definition, then the assimilation of minorities is to give up some or all of their national identity and to take on another national identity. Assimilation, in this sense, is to leave the minority group and enter the majority group. We can talk about intrageneration assimilation, which is about the transition of a person to a nationality at some point in his/her life. Intergenerational or lineage assimilation, on the other hand, is not a change in the life path of an individual, but a process that goes through generations. This can happen in two generations, when the child(ren)'s nationality is different from that of their parents or, in the case of a mixed marriage, they choose the identity of one parent (usually the majority). However, it may be a multi-generational process as well, with each generation losing some of its ancestral national identity and the last generation having another national identity. So, each generation goes one step further by assimilation (SANDBERG 1973).

By replacing the original identity, the minority can fully take over the identity of the majority nation, or only some of its elements, thus creating a mixed identity. In the event of full takeover, the minority is completely identified with the majority, loses, or voluntarily abandons its national identity and mother tongue, and instead adopts the identity of the majority nation (BRUBAKER 2002, TÓTH 2008). This can be interpreted both at individual and group level. At the individual level, the individual gives up his/her original identity and takes over the identity of majority nation. At the group level, we can talk about the full or partial assimilation of a minority. In the case of full assimilation, the given nationality gives up its identity and is completely absorbed into the majority nation, but in the case of partial assimilation it loses only certain parts of its identity. In this case, larger groups are formed and change their identity, often due to mixed marriages (MIRNICS 1994). Partial assimilation can still be reversed, but it can end with the complete incorporation of the minority.

In case of mixing, we can talk about merging groups. This is when two or more cultures merge, not minorities changing their identities. Here, the adaptation is incomplete, as both parties lose something of their previous national identity. The new national identity is created from the elements of the former one, taking over certain elements from each of them, thus creating a new national identity, which is different from the previous ones (YINGER 2002, TÓTH 2008). The best-known example is the American melting pot (PARK 1955). The theory is that many immigrants arriving in America will give up their original national identity and culture and merge into the American culture, which is the result of the merge of immigrant cultures. A similar process could be observed in the former Yugoslavia as well. The multinational country did not officially have a nation-state, but there was a significant demand for that from the leadership. To this end, Yugoslav nationality was created, which was a common Southern Slavic national identity, and its elements consisted of the identity of the Slavic nations living there (BAKIĆ-HAYDEN-HAYDEN 1992, LOSONCZ 1994). It was primarily couples living in mixed marriages and those born here, as well as members of minorities who adopted this national identity. In this case, we are talking about state-supported (and sometimes forced) national merge. However, after the country was disintegrated, state support ceased, and identity went into crisis.

5. ABOUT RESEARCH

Our research aims to compare the situation of the largest minority in Hungary and Serbia in terms of their assimilation and national identity. In the case of Serbia, we examined the situation of Hungarians in Vojvodina, and in the case of Hungary the situation of the Gypsies. There are many dimensions to analyse national and ethnic identity, but due to its narrow scope, this study examines language as one of the most important elements determining identity.

For the sake of comparability, our study looks at a process from the 1960s to the present, how the linguistic attachment and identity-forming power of the two minority groups has changed.

In our empirical research, it is important to mention the unfavourable regional location of the settlements and the composition of the inhabitants as they influence the formation of the identity. The survey was conducted in disadvantaged settlements where, according to the Central Statistical Office (KSH 2011), members of our chosen ethnic and national minority groups are overrepresented. These settlements were chosen because they are in the majority as minority groups, so the changing forms of identity can be better observed in this region. Thus, it is clear that both minority groups

live as the majority in the settlements, thereby they can use their own language not only at home or in their own “closed” communities, but also have much more opportunity to experience the linguistic dimension of national and ethnic identity. Thus, the regional location of the settlements as well as the ethnic and national composition of the settlements significantly influence the identity – not just the particular historical period – in the examined time period.

Looking over a longer period of time gives us the opportunity to observe how hereditary language patterns change, their role in preserving ethnic, national identity and the nature and usability of hereditary patterns.

The majority of respondents in the Vojvodina sample interviewed were women, as they are generally of Hungarian nationality in mixed marriages (RZS²). In the Romani sample, however, only female respondents were interviewed, as women play a key role in the continuation of traditions and language.

In the preparation of our interview draft, we also used previously prepared quantitative and qualitative data related to the topic – Census, nationality databases, Hungarian Youth Research database, Gypsy investigation database (KEMÉNY–JÁNKY–LENGYEL 2004), time series data tables of RZS. In our interview draft, we tried to make the wording clear, since it is important that they can easily understand the questions asked.

During our research in Vojvodina 30 interviews and with Romani women 44 interviews were recorded with a voice recorder. The transcript analysis of the audio material was conducted in communities where the change in language use was clearly observable during the period under review. We have deliberately placed these communities at the centre of our analysis, as changes in language use are more pronounced in this way. During the processing, interviews of national and ethnic groups are presented separately, as identity is a historical formation, a learned structure. At different times in different periods of history, different economic, political, and cultural influences have taken place and shaped the content of the identity of national and ethnic minorities. However, at the end of our study, we summarize the results of the interviews and look for connecting points in the linguistic dimension determining the identity of the two minority groups.

Besides the temporal validity of the research results, it is important to mention the spatial limitations. We cannot claim that the experience gained in the settlements we investigate can be generalized to all couples living in mixed marriages and to all Romani minorities. What is more, it is likely that the linguistic dimension and structure of national and ethnic identities may vary from one settlement to another, depending on geographical location, economic environment, mobility opportunities, historical background, and preserved cultural traditions.

6. THE LANGUAGE OF HUNGARIANS IN VOJVODINA

“It is best if we find a scapegoat, and then the scapegoat is the guilty one, we hang it up, and the problem is solved. That is why things go wrong. Well, we usually know this from history, and from everyday practice, people are reluctant to look for the fault within themselves, but to look for a scapegoat. And it is the best to have a scapegoat and everything becomes resolved. And of course in a mixed marriage, well, if the marriage failed, it was not because I did not do something well or the woman did not do it well, but because she is of a different nationality, of a different religion, her skin is not as coloured as mine and the like.”

² Republicki Zavod za Statistiku – Serbian Statistical Office.

The Hungarian language plays a central role in the national identity of the Hungarians of Vojvodina and is one of its foundations. However, the Hungarian language version used in Vojvodina differs in part from the Hungarian language version, as it contains Serbian loanwords and some of its elements are more archaic (GÁBRITY 2013). Language can be seen as a semiotic tool which is capable of conveying our identity (BAILEY 2007). This is no different in the case of Hungarians in Vojvodina, who are the easiest to express their national identity by using their language. However, several versions of the Vojvodina Hungarian language can be observed. The Hungarian language spoken in the areas of mass Hungarians³ is saturated with much less Serbian contact effect than Hungarian spoken sporadically. The language spoken sporadically shows a high degree of language deterioration: it is interspersed with Serbian words and sentence structures typical of Serbian are also common. This suggests the strong influence of Serbian language and national identity and the advanced state of assimilation of Hungarians.

Most Hungarians in Vojvodina are bilingual and younger generations are characterised by multilingualism.⁴ The majority of Hungarians in Vojvodina speak Serbian besides Hungarian, and many of them also know a world language such as English, German, or Russian (GÁBRITY 2013). The phenomenon of code change is also common, as most Hungarians in Vojvodina speak Serbian at their workplaces and in the offices, but in the private sphere they communicate in Hungarian. However, mixed marriages are an exception, as home-based communication in these families happens mainly in Serbian.

The identity and language use of Hungarians in Vojvodina underwent significant changes in the socialist era. The legitimacy of Tito's system took place in the 1960s, and Yugoslavia was recognized internationally. In economic terms, it was a period of prosperity, as forced industrialization created many new jobs. Unlike the countries of the Eastern Bloc, the concept of unemployment was recognized, and the unemployed were not labelled as social parasites. However, the existence of large-scale unemployment was incompatible with the socialist ideology, thereby the significant number of jobseekers could not be ignored. The problem was solved by agreements with West Germany, which allowed many Yugoslav workers to work in Germany. The emigration solved the labor surplus in the country and remittances also helped the country's economy. Western goods brought in by migrant workers have also become established in Yugoslavia, and some of the symbols of "Western life" (own car, coffee machine, etc.) have become part of everyday life here (SZERBHORVÁTH 2016). At that time, Yugoslavia was a bridge between East and West, and Hungarians of Vojvodina played a key role in this. The relations of the Hungarians with the Hungarians in their native country became the channels of trade in goods, and during this period the Subotica Flea Market was established, the primary function of which was the delivery of Western goods to Hungary. As a result, Hungarians in the South had a higher status because they had relationships on the "other side" of the Iron Curtain as well.

"My husband and I have travelled to Hungary for a holiday several times. It was a much poorer place than Yugoslavia, which was visible on their clothes too, but the cleanliness was everywhere,

³ The majority of Hungarians in Vojvodina live in northern Bačka, where in several districts they form an absolute or relative majority. Hungarians living here make up the mass Hungarians.

⁴ However, in the areas of mass Hungarians, especially in case of the members of the younger generations, they never learn Serbian. This is mainly due to the lack of Serbian language education at school and the fact that they do not need Serbian in everyday life or that they can cope with only its basic knowledge.

much better than ours. If we were near the border, we went to the public toilets on the Hungarian side, because the Yugoslav toilets looked like a pigsty, with discarded cigarettes and so on. Cleanliness was always taken care of the Hungarians. (...) My husband and I once went to a spa and walked in downtown. I noticed that he was acting a bit strange, as if he were nervous. He just turned to me and asked if something was wrong here. He didn't understand why there was such silence in the city. I laughed and told him that there was nothing wrong, only Hungarians do not like to shout on the streets." (Hungarian woman)

During the period of socialism, Hungarian was also an official language in the country and could be used in state institutions. Officially, Hungarian could be spoken anywhere, but the reality did not always coincide with the principles expressed in the media. The assimilation of the Hungarians was officially a taboo subject, but in practice it took place with great force. Knowledge of the Serbian language was a basic requirement in most workplaces, and Hungarians who were in a higher position were expected to marry or teach their children in Serbian (MIRNICS 1998). People living in mixed marriages usually communicated in Serbian, as the Serbian did not learn Hungarian.

"Well, we speak Serbian because my husband doesn't speak Hungarian very well. He understands some things, but he cannot speak the language." (Hungarian woman)

"We only spoke Serbian, unfortunately only Serbian. It was said that we could watch TV in both languages, but in the end, we always watched it in Serbian (...) He said he wanted to learn Hungarian but eventually he never learned it." (divorced Hungarian woman)

However, bilingualism was also present in the areas of mass Hungarians. In many places, it was a common practice for children to be taught in both languages, not just in Serbian.

"We talked to each other in Serbian, but I spoke Hungarian to the children, and he talked to them in Serbian, so the child knew both languages perfectly by the age of three (...) When I was alone or with the kid, I watched the TV in Hungarian, but when we were together then we watched it in Serbian. But if I found a series, or something that I wanted to watch, then we could watch it in Hungarian too, even if he was at home." (Hungarian woman)

"When the children were born, he spoke to them in Serbian, because I don't speak the Serbian so well, and he don't speak Hungarian clearly, so he only speaks Serbian ... they were little babies and many people said that why do we do it in this way, we will confuse the children. But I said this won't confuse them. They will get used to it that their father talks to them in Serbian and I will talk to them in Hungarian. When they were barely toddling and someone came, they could say hello anyway. Then children looked at that person and said Dobar dan. And the person asked me how they know what to say. But I think they didn't know it, but they somehow felt it, or I don't know, because surely that person said something to them previously, and then they knew what it was about. So, it was really good for us that the children spoke two languages." (Hungarian woman)

Thus, in the Yugoslav era, Hungarians had an acceptable status, not being a persecuted minority. However, assimilation pressure was present, and in mixed marriages communication mainly happened in Serbian. The use of the Hungarian language was hidden, but it was significantly restricted.

Mixed marriages were the benchmark for national cohabitation in the Yugoslav era. The Yugoslav government has promoted mixed marriages and presented to the international media that the proportion of heterogamous marriages is increasing in the country. With the outbreak of the Yugoslav wars, the situation changed and positions on mixed marriages took a full turn. Which until then was the most beautiful example of the celebrated "brotherhood unity", it became a collaboration with the enemy

during the war. Those living in heterogamous marriages have come under severe strain of identity. There were some who could not decide who they really were and henceforth which nation they belonged to. Others were able to make a decision and went to war as part of the free teams on either side (SEKELJ 1994). Although there was no war in Vojvodina, there was tension there too. And the deep economic crisis that followed the war only worsened the conditions that were already fierce.

After the war, the use of the Hungarian language was significantly restricted. Although it functioned as an official language, it was not used in offices. Many of them suffered from severe atrocities because they did not speak Serbian properly. According to the interviews, mixed marriages did not show any significant change in this area. In most cases, communication between couples has been in Serbian, and this has remained dominant during this period. However, statistics show that the number of mixed marriages has dropped significantly, as shown in the interviews: far fewer interviewees were found to be married during this period than during the Socialist or post-2010 period.

"We usually speak in Serbian. I think he understands a lot, you know, I taught him..."
(Hungarian woman)

Since 2010, there have been significant changes compared to the post-war period. It is not possible to name a specific date, but the first step in the process may be the breakaway of Kosovo in 2008. It was at this time that statements sympathetic to the Hungarians began to appear in Serbian media, in many places the loss of Kosovo was referred to as the Serbian Trianon, and Kosovo was compared to Transylvania. The next milestone for Hungarians was the granting of dual citizenship. As a result, the status of Hungarians has increased significantly in the country, as Hungarian citizenship was also a passport of the European Union. Many non-Hungarian Serbs from mixed marriages began studying Hungarian. Some level of attachment to Hungary and their Hungarian ancestors has also developed, who have not considered themselves Hungarian at any level (HARPAZ 2016). There has also been a significant change in Serbian political life, with the replacement of the former rhetoric of government and the new leadership's efforts to establish friendly relations with Hungary. The communication between the spouses in this third phase is still mainly in Serbian, but in many places the Serbian side is opening up to the Hungarian language.

"Well, I don't know. All right, it might have been a bit strange at the beginning. I got used to that (before marriage) we always spoke Hungarian at home and then we switched to (Serbian), but you can get used to it soon." (Hungarian woman)

"Me and her usually speak Serbian, but we speak Hungarian with the children. Well, the girls speak Hungarian, while the little one speaks both the languages. Because I speak to him in Hungarian, while his mother speaks to him Serbian. Well, he understands everything, but he doesn't speak very well. He is uncomfortable because he feels that he does not know correctly and then he doesn't speak." (Hungarian man)

"Well, we speak Serbian because he is studying Hungarian now. But otherwise he knows Hungarian because he has learned a lot, he speaks very well, because when we met, I didn't really know Serbian. And he learned something from his mom too and because he works here in the village, you know, there are a lot of Hungarians, so he could learn many things because what I say to him once he remarks and calls it back. He speaks Hungarian with my friend because she speaks very bad Serbian. Yes, so I think he will learn the language within a couple of years, and he also speaks English, but I don't speak it, just Serbian. And sometimes in Hungarian, after all, because when I speak to him in Hungarian, then he answers back." (Hungarian woman)

As we have seen, the use of the Serbian language plays an important role in the identity of the Hungarian minority in Vojvodina. Although the interviews were conducted with mixed marriages, the results can also be applied to the situation of the Hungarians. In the socialist era, Hungarians were not officially subordinate, yet the use of Serbian dominated both mixed marriages and work. The strongest assimilation can be supposed at this time as well, as mobility channels were opened to the Hungarians at this time (widespread mixed marriages, getting into better jobs). During the Southern Slavic wars as well as in the following period the dominance of the Serbian language can be observed. It is important to emphasize here that the speaker accepts the values of the culture in which he/she speaks (GÖNCZ 2004). Thus, Serbian speakers will primarily consider the identity of the Serbian nation, so the dominance of the Serbian language will lead to assimilation of the Hungarians. In recent years, the relationship between the two nations has improved, with Hungarians gaining more and more recognition in the country. As a result, we are seeing an increase in bilingualism. In many cases, the Serbian partner has learned or is learning the Hungarian language, which may reduce the degree of assimilation, since if both languages are equal, the assumption of a Hungarian identity and the emergence of a dual identity is possible. However, the assimilation of Hungarians has advanced significantly in the past decades and it is questionable whether current positive trends will be able to reverse this.

7. “LANGUAGE OR NOT, I AM A GYPSY”

The mother tongue has a key role to play in preserving ethnicity, identity, and cohesion, as the objective dimension of ethnicity is thus its main feature. According to FISHMAN (1975), language is not a conscious factor, except when it functions as a means of border keeping. By “unconsciousness” he means that in speech acts language is not valued, but it is merely a means of communication. During the period of nationalization, the survival of minority ethnic groups, the formation of their identity and self-determination meant the knowledge of their mother tongue. Thus, language was not only a means of communication, but also a conscious demarcation, a separator, protective, and defender function. The mother tongue appears as a central category in the self-definition of ethnic groups.

At the beginning of the period under study, in the 1960s, the representatives of the socialist ideology did not recognize Gypsyism as an independent culture, but only as a social group whose lifestyle was exclusively due to poverty. The state therefore pursued a strong assimilation policy against the Roma in order to address their social problems. However, this attitude met with opposition from the Gypsies because they did not want to give up their culture and language, so the violent attempt of socialist assimilation was unsuccessful.

During the research, it was noticeable that all Romani women born in the late 1960s named Gypsy as their mother tongue within the settlement. This most prominent variable is the most important sign of a sense of Romani identity and the preservation of group identity. Linguistic contacts are also influenced by economic relations, everyday forms of coexistence, and ideological views of the period in relation to Romani culture.

“We also listen to the mass in the temple in Gypsy, and I also pray in Gypsy at home, because I am a Gypsy and my prayer can only reach the Lord in Gypsy...” (1960s)

“In the family and in the village, I speak to everyone in the Gypsy language. In Hungarian, I don’t always remember what I want to say...” (1960s)

The use of the Gypsy language among the Romani women living in the settlement born in the late 1960s is unconscious, mostly based on emotion. Often, even if they are not only surrounded by members of their own community, they will automatically speak Gypsy. In Gypsy, they are better able to express themselves and their feelings, as this was their primary language during their socialization. As far as language is concerned, the Gypsy language is still the primary one, although the Hungarian language appears in their daily lives for the sake of easier prosperity – e.g. during the interviews.

In the 1960s and 1970s, it was noticeable that Gypsy was the primary language among the ascendants of the then-born Romani generation. Thus, the origin coincided with their mother tongue, which is why these deep-seated roots are difficult to change for new patterns, and so old values were passed down to the next generation. The language, as the subjective and objective dimension of an ethnic group, completely overlapped during this period and further strengthened the Romani identity and adherence to the Gypsy language of the examined Romani women – despite that the state called for the merge and complete assimilation of Gypsies in accordance with the People’s Resolution of 1961.

The forced industrialization⁵ of the period and the changes in public education⁶ – continuously since 1945 – also influenced the language usage of the Romani people. However, getting to school and workplace fundamentally changed the language usage of the Gypsies. As teachers, classmates, employers, and colleagues did not speak Gypsy, families often raised their children consciously in Hungarian.⁷

In the 1970s, the easing of state pressure and the recognition happened that full assimilation is not the solution to improve the situation of the Romani people, but rather the emphasis must be on their integration. The creation of Romani intellectuals and efforts to preserve culture came to the forefront – the first Romani World Congress in 1971, Romani language reform and fine arts. The party decision of 1979 recognized Gypsies as ethnicities – not nationalities.

However, during this period, the Romani women studied in the settlement show an intermediate state of bilingualism, with a gradual decline of the Gypsy language. Although language is still the most important element of their ethnic identity and reinforces their sense of belonging, it is the basis of their cultural autonomy. Knowledge of the Gypsy language is one of the most important components of their ethnic identity, essentially a sign of their belonging to their culture. Knowledge of the language and, most of all, its use within their community has an integrative role, but beyond the “walls” of the community, the language of the majority society comes in the foreground.

⁵ In the 1970s, there was no significant difference in the economic activity of Gypsy women, men, and non-Gypsies – 87.7% of the total population had some kind of employment, compared to 85.2% of Gypsies. For women, the proportion was 64% (total population) and 30% (Gypsies). (KEMÉNY–JÁNKY–LENGYEL 2004)

⁶ The 8-grade school was registered into law and made compulsory for everyone. Successive governments have worked hard to achieve this. The proportion of Gypsy children not enrolled in school between ’43 and ’48 dropped to 37 percent, and later between ’48 and ’53 dropped to 27 percent. Between 1953 and 1957, the proportion of non-students was 13 percent and 9 percent for the next five years. (KEMÉNY–JÁNKY–LENGYEL 2004)

⁷ In 1971, about the 71% of the Hungarian Romani population were Hungarian native speakers, 21.2% of them were Romani and 7.6% of them were Bayash native speakers, while according to the 2003 data, only 7.7% of them were Romani, 4.6% of them Bayash native speakers, while 86.9% of them were native Hungarian speakers. (KEMÉNY–JÁNKY–LENGYEL 2004. 39)

“To know the Gypsy language... well that’s something ... we’ve always talked like this here ... (name of the settlement) ... I didn’t even notice sometimes when I spoke Gypsy to Hungarians, as it came so... you know, it’s just coming...” (1970s)

“I’ve always used Gypsy, but when I went in... (name of the settlement) then I only used the Hungarian... because the Hungarian postwoman did not understand Gypsy at all” (1970s)

“I talked to the kids in Gypsy at home... they don’t ... but that’s okay... well, a little ... but I understand” (1970s)

During this period, the presence and role of diglossian bilingualism can be observed in the language use of the respondents. This means that they use Gypsy in their closed community at home, but they use Hungarian at school, at work, and in official business. However, there is a functional difference between the two languages, and they are used in different situations. They express themselves in the Gypsy language in their closed family environment, where emotional and everyday matters are primarily discussed. At school, at the workplace, in the centre of the settlement, and even within their community, when it comes to official matters, they speak Hungarian, since the Hungarian language is “related” to this topic. The two languages work together to function as representing the mother tongue for monolinguals. However, the interviews also reveal that, although the loss of language is becoming more visible and the “clean” use of the Gypsy language is beginning to fall into the background, it is still an important identity-building dimension in the lives of Romani minority women in the settlement.

The use of the Gypsy language contributes greatly to the preservation of the identity of the Hungarian Romanies. Following the change of regime, the government made an increasing commitment to state funding for minorities.⁸ It has become increasingly common in the primary schools to employ so-called pedagogical assistants from the Gypsy community, who have taught both teachers and students the knowledge of the Gypsy population and the Gypsy language. The state has supported initiatives aimed at preserving the Romani language and culture⁹ – especially in higher education, teacher training, kindergarten training, colleges, universities – to provide education in the Gypsy language as well.

Following the change of regime, it was observed among Romani women living in the settlement that the increasing contact with members of the majority society also affects the use of the Romani language. It is now becoming increasingly rare for someone to use the Gypsy language every day, even within their own closed community. The interviews revealed that they know the Gypsy language, but they try to passively use it even in their own closed community. In the background of this, assimilation patterns can be discovered. Despite the passive use of the language, their Gypsy origin was not questioned in themselves.

“You can study Gypsy here at the university as well, and many people enrol, but not because language is so important to them... just because they need a language exam...” (after the regime change until today)

⁸ In 1991, central government subsidies increased to HUF 90 million from the previous 40 million. (FORRAY 2012)

⁹ From sociological research (FORRAY 2012), we know that after the regime change, more and more (mainly) civic initiatives have developed in several parts of the country, mainly targeting school-aged Gypsy children, and strengthening their relationship with culture. In this process, we can also include higher education programs – first civil initiatives, church organizations for a few years, then state organizations (e.g. Romani special colleges) – which seek to support Romani young people in achieving their diploma as well as to make closer ties with their culture, thus trying to “revive” the Gypsy language.

“In the group, I am the only one Gypsy, no one would understand if I said something in Gypsy now, so I wouldn’t use it anywhere” (after the regime change until today)

“Oh, I don’t use it at home either ... you know it’s better in this way...” (after the regime change until today)

The family, the closed community, seems to be losing its inheritance function. More frequent contact with the majority society, longer time spent in educational institutions, and appearance in the labor market all influence language usage patterns during this period. The interviews revealed that not only the “fear of discrimination”, the limited use of language, but also the composition of a group of friends from outside of the community lead to the usage of the language of the majority society.

Language is considered to be the most important dimension of ethnicity, identity, and representation in the literature for the first generation. For second generation Gypsy women, clothing is less pronounced due to changed environmental conditions. However, the role of language in enhancing ethnic identity remained strong. Characteristics that define external identity are “easier” to leave, whereas language that is based on an internal, emotional basis is more difficult to leave. For members of the third generation, both clothing and language are no longer a crucial dimension of identity. After the regime change, it can be observed to this day that the majority of interviewees know the language, but it has a role in their life as passive and inactive knowledge. It can be observed in the settlement during the period examined that when forced assimilation attempts were made in the early ’60s, the role of the Gypsy language in the construction of identity was strengthened. While from the regime change until today – where most Romani cultural and linguistic supportive initiatives have taken place – there has been a steady loss of language in the community.

According to Michael Stewart, isolation, separation from the majority society is an integral part of Romani culture. Therefore, the survival of culture and language is endangered if, for example, Romani girls’ study time is postponed, increasing their chances of assimilation. They no longer spend their daily lives within a closed community, but in an accelerated world of globalization and modernization (FORRAY–HEGEDŰS 2003). External, structural factors influence the linguistic identity dimension of Gypsy women as well. Economic, political, and social processes have given different socialization patterns and strategies to Gypsy women in different decades. Sometimes they reinforce the Gypsy language in the female members of the community and have the role of pushing it aside and of applying it side by side, depending on the situation, to commit to constructing their identity.

SUMMARY

As we have seen, there are many similarities between the situation of Hungarians in Vojvodina and the situation of the Romani in Hungary, but there are also many differences. For the Hungarians of Vojvodina, Hungarian language is still one of the most important elements of identity formation, but for Romanies (especially among young people), it is no longer the most important factor. Hungarians undergo mixed assimilation and loss of language in mixed marriages with Serbians, while Romani language is marginalized regardless of mixed marriages.

In the socialist era, both Hungarians in Vojvodina and Gypsies in Hungary were under intense assimilation pressure, although in the Socialist Hungary, this was an explicit and open process, but in Vojvodina it was a hidden but powerful process. After the regime change, the situation

of Romanies improved a lot in Hungary, because the goal was not their assimilation, but rather their integration. In Serbia, however, from the 1990s onwards, the state regarded Hungarians as an internal enemy, trying to assimilate or eliminate them. Since 2010, however, there has been a significant easing and an increase in the status of Hungarians. The situation of the Romanies has also improved significantly in the last decade.

For both Romanies and Hungarians in Vojvodina, the strongest assimilation and loss of language occurs when they are offered the opportunity to integrate into the structure of the majority society and new channels of mobility are opened. In the case of Romanies, this phenomenon can be observed mainly in the years after the regime change, when the goal of the state was no longer assimilation but integration. However, their integration into the labor market has resulted in more contact with the majority society, which has led to the loss of their mother tongue. The Gypsy language was at a significant disadvantage compared to the Hungarian language.

In the case of Hungarians in Vojvodina, the strongest assimilation can be observed in the socialist era, also when they open their integration into the structural system of the majority society. The role of mixed marriages can be easily understood here, since Hungarians living in or coming from a heterogamous relationship cannot use only Hungarian in their official or private sphere. As a result, the Serbian language is gaining a significant advantage over the Hungarian, and this process accelerates the loss of language and the assimilation of the Hungarian people.

Assimilation tendencies are advanced for both minority groups and reversing them is a difficult process. However, the future question is whether this slow-moving, improving trend will be able to prevent total language loss and assimilation.

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