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Hungarian in Canada: A macro-sociolinguistic analysis

Abstract

The present study focuses on two Canadian-Hungarian communities, providing a macro-sociolinguistic analysis of their language use. First, we briefly describe Hungarian as a pluricentric language and its presence in Canada. Second, a macro-sociolinguistic description of the communities is given, focusing on five topics: (1) the source of acquisition of Hungarian, (2) the choice of language in the private and public spheres, (3) speakers' self-evaluation of language competence, (4) their regional and national attachment, and (5) the prestige of Hungarian in the community and attitudes towards the various varieties of Hungarian. Our results show that in spite of the desire to maintain the heritage language, a shift to the majority language can be observed through loss of domains of heritage language use among second- and third-generation speakers. Finally, our results are compared to available data on similar studies carried out in other Hungarian-speaking areas, thus providing opportunity for comparison of non-dominant varieties of Hungarian in different settings.

1. Introduction – Hungarian as a pluricentric language and its presence in Canada

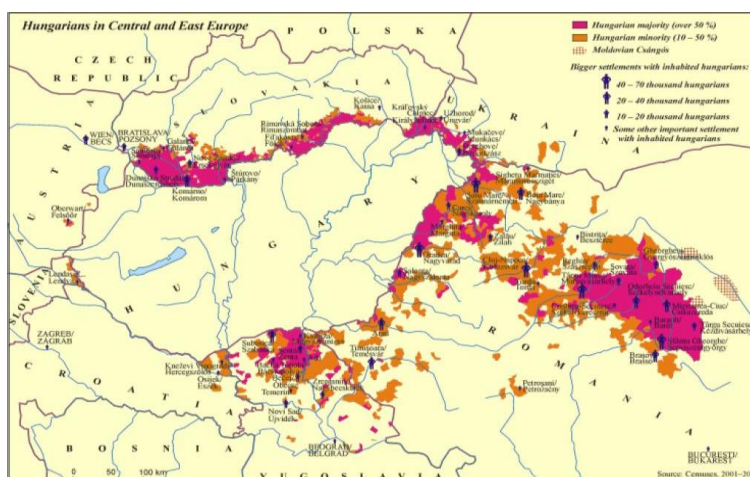
Kloss (1978: 66-67, cited in Clyne 1992: 1) defines pluricentric languages as ‘‘languages with several interacting centers, each providing a national variety with at least some of its own codified norms’’. On the other hand, Lanstyák (1996) defines pluricentric languages as languages spoken in more than one country and widely used in elevated domains (e.g. state administration, education, media, religious services, cultural organizations, scientific research etc.). This definition adds more understanding to the original definition, however, it is not clear to what

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extent one language has to be used in such domains in a country in order to be considered a center of the pluricentric language in question.

Clyne (ed. 1992) presents different cases of linguistic pluricentrality such as plurinational (Spanish in Spain, Mexico, etc. or French in France, Quebec etc.), pluriregional (Northern or Southern Germany) or pluristatal (Korean in North versus South Korea). Pluricentric languages can be further classified as symmetric (British, American or Australian English) or asymmetric (French of the Île de France vs. Quebecois French) based on whether the different varieties have equal prestige or whether one variety has more power or more prestige over the others. Asymmetrical or unbalanced linguistic situations call for a differentiation between dominating vs. non-dominating varieties (Muhr 2004).

1. 1. Definitions of Hungarian as a pluricentric language.



Map 1. The distribution of Hungarians in the countries neighboring Hungary.

No matter which definition is applied, Hungarian is, without doubt, a pluricentric language (see Map 1.). However, due to the various interpretations of the existing definitions questions arise concerning which variety can be considered a center of Hungarian. Hungarian would most probably count as a pluristatal language since its speakers live in different countries being separated by political borders as a result of the Treaty of Trianon (1920) concluding WWI. Hungarian is an asymmetrical pluricentric language with its dominating variety in Hungary, its center in Budapest, while the varieties spoken outside of Hungary are non-dominating varieties.

Kenesei (2006) differentiates between major and minor centers, where the local varieties have different status and (socio)linguistic attributes. The varieties

spoken in major centers have the status of an official language, are used in administration, and have more speakers and higher prestige, while the varieties of minor centers are usually spoken by a minority, are repressed in public domains, only have regional significance, and have a small number of speakers and low prestige.

The varieties of Hungarian spoken in the countries neighboring Hungary, especially the ones with a fairly large number of speakers (Slovakia, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine) are unquestionably accepted as centers of Hungarian. However, based on Lanstyák's (1996) definition, the variety of Hungarian spoken in Canada might also count as a center since it is used in a number of elevated domains, such as in church, in the media and in education. Kenesei's (2006) account of the sociolinguistic characteristics of minor centers may also allow the Canadian variety to be accepted as a minor center of Hungarian, since it only has a vernacular form with limited registers, limited styles, and mixed elements of vocabulary, and speakers of Hungarian usually have negative attitudes towards this variety.

Canadian Hungarian is a contact variety and defining its status as a non-dominating or minor center of Hungarian goes beyond the aims of the present paper. Even though clarifying or further refining the definitions is necessary, in the following sections we focus on the Hungarian variety spoken in Canada through the macro-sociolinguistic analysis of two communities, Toronto and Hamilton.

1. 2. Hungarians in Canada

Hungarians came to Canada in four major immigration waves (Dreisziger 1999): before 1914 (about 8,000), between 1925 and 1930 (about 26,000), between 1948 and 1952 (about 12,000 postwar displaced persons), and in 1956 and 1957 (about 37,000 refugees). The first presence of Hungarians in the Toronto area and in Hamilton dates back to the 1930s (Patrias 1979). According to 2006 census data, there are 315,510 ethnic Hungarians in Canada, out of whom 151,750 live in Ontario, 53,210 in Toronto, and 15,155 in Hamilton.

The status of Hungarian in Canada is that of a heritage language, which, according to Harrison's (2001) definition, is a language the speakers of which are individuals with a cultural connection to a language other than English or French, born abroad or born within Canada and descended from speakers who learned the language in the homeland, and are fluent enough to have a conversation in the language.

Hungarian is most predominantly used within the family, at church and in

heritage language schools. There are eight Hungarian churches in Toronto and three in Hamilton. Heritage language schools provide classes for grades 1 through 8. Hungarian in this situation constitutes both the target language and the language of instruction. At present there are two such schools in Toronto and one in Hamilton. The Hungarian Helicon Society in Toronto provides Hungarian classes at the high school level as well as language courses for adults. In addition, Hungarian language courses are also offered at the University of Toronto.

Hungarian is also present in the media. In the Toronto and Hamilton areas there are several monolingual Hungarian newspapers as well as Hungarian English bilingual magazines printed in Canada (*Kanadai Magyarorság*, *Magyar Élet*, *Kalejdoszkóp* etc.). In addition, Hungarian radio and TV programs are also available.

Additional organizations providing opportunities for the Hungarian population to practice their culture and language are the Hungarian Cultural Center, the folk-dance ensembles, scouting, the Rákóczi Foundation, the Helikon Society and many others.

In describing the macro-sociolinguistic situation of the two communities in question, we will focus on the following six research questions:

1. What are the main loci of acquisition of Hungarian among Canadian-Hungarians?
2. What languages are used in private and public spheres?
3. What levels of language proficiency do speakers report to have?
4. How does the regional and national attachment of the subjects manifest itself?
5. What attitudes do speakers have towards different varieties of Hungarian?
6. In what ways does the Canadian-Hungarian community compare to other Hungarian communities outside Hungary?

2. Method

Our research into the Canadian-Hungarian community relies on a questionnaire carried out among a total of 59 Hungarians in the Toronto and Hamilton areas in 2011 (31 first-, 22 second-, and 6 third-generation speakers). These two cities play a crucial role in the Hungarian community of Ontario and Canada since Toronto and Hamilton represent the present and the former Hungarian centers in Ontario. All interviews were conducted in Hungarian at

normal speed and none of the informants had difficulty in carrying out the interview.

The questionnaire used for data collection was a modified version of the Sociolinguistics of Hungarian Outside Hungary (SHOH) questionnaire, which was primarily developed for studying the Hungarian varieties in the countries neighboring Hungary (see Kontra 2005). The questionnaire contains general and more specific questions concerning language use as well as items eliciting grammaticality judgments. For the purpose of the present study only questions concerning language learning and use have been considered, more specifically questions concerning the loci of acquisition of Hungarian, language use in public and private spheres, self-reported language proficiency levels, regional and national attachment, and attitudes towards the different varieties of Hungarian. The answers for these questions have been compared across the generations in order to be able to spot any trends or on-going change concerning their use of Hungarian.

The use of the SHOH questionnaire in several Hungarian communities provides an opportunity to compare the findings of the Canadian-Hungarian community to other Hungarian communities in different settings. For this purpose we will rely on data reported on Hungarians in Slovakia (Lanstyák 2000 and Lanstyák & Szabó Mihály 2005), Hungarians in Ukraine (Csernicskó 1998 and 2005) Hungarians in Serbia (Göncz 1999 and Göncz & Vörös 2005) and Hungarians in the US (Polgár 2001 and Fenyvesi 2005).

3. Discussion

In this section, we will present our findings broken down into topics highlighted by the six research questions listed above, trying to give a sufficient answer to each one of them. These questions will form the backbone of our investigations, providing an obvious structure to the study.

3. 1. What are the main loci of acquisition of Hungarian among Canadian-Hungarians?

As shown in Figure 1, the most important loci of acquisition of Hungarian are family and school (named in total by 98% and 81% of the respondents, respectively). These seem to be the two spheres that play the most important role in the intergenerational transmission of Hungarian as a heritage language. This proves the tendency suggested by Campbell & Christian (2003: 17), calling these two spheres the most essential sources of heritage language input in the case of

immigrant children.

In the case of second- and third-generation speakers, school in this context is to be understood as a Hungarian heritage language school operated separately from the official Canadian elementary and secondary schools that the participants attend(ed), whereas for first-generation speakers (i.e. immigrants) it refers to official schools in Hungary.

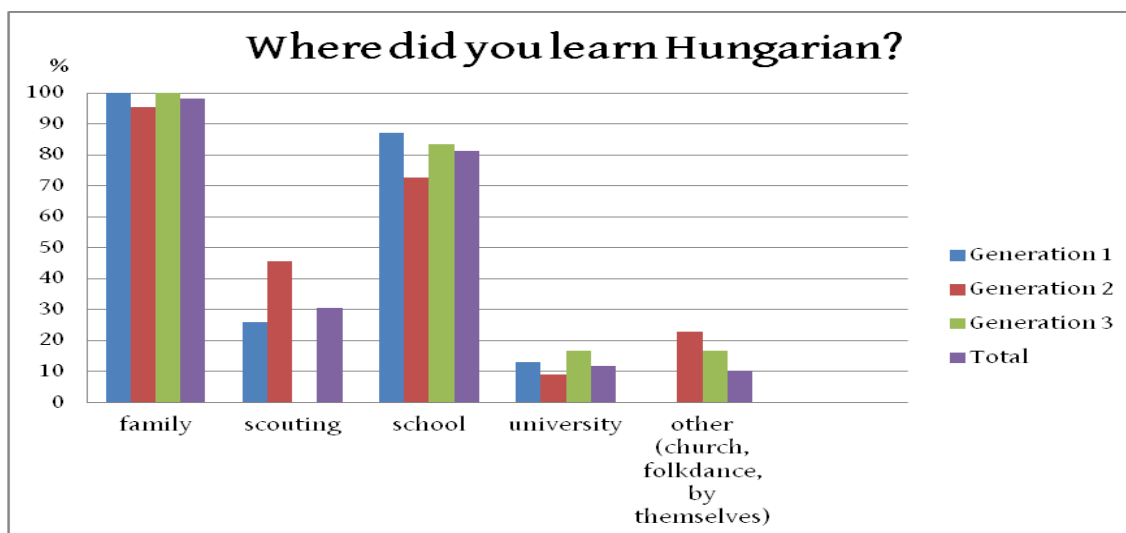


Figure 1. The main loci of acquisition

Apart from family and school, other loci that were also claimed by the participants to be important in the acquisition of Hungarian include scouting, university, church, and folkdance clubs, etc. Scouting plays an important role in the case of second-generation speakers (45% of whom claimed to have acquired Hungarian there, as compared to the total 31%). Although scouting definitely involves religion to a certain extent (the scout troops being loosely connected to the various Hungarian parishes in Toronto and Hamilton in the present case), its importance goes beyond the realm of religion and is essential in maintaining both the heritage language and the cultural identity that goes along with it.

3.2. What languages are used in private and public spheres?

3.2.1. Private spheres

In connection with this topic, the participants were asked what language they usually used in interactions with family members, friends, and neighbors (see Table 1). They reported using both Hungarian and English in the majority of the domains, with English being predominant with neighbors (used by 97% of the speakers), and Hungarian being used mainly with parents and grandparents (reported by 51% and 66%, respectively). In the remaining three categories (i.e.

children, spouse, and friends), both Hungarian and English tend to be used by most of the speakers (47%, 32% and 83%, respectively).

...with the following interlocutors	The language speakers use in conversations...											
	1 st Generation			2 nd Generation			3 rd Generation			Total		
	Hu	En	Hu & En	Hu	En	Hu & En	Hu	En	Hu & En	Hu	En	Hu & En
parents	77	-	6	27	5	64	-	34	67	51	5	34
grandparents	68	-	-	64	-	14	67	-	34	66	-	8
children	26	-	68	-	5	32	-	-	-	14	2	47
spouse	48	-	42	5	23	23	-	-	17	27	8	32
friends	10	-	90	-	14	82	-	50	50	5	10	83
neighbors	-	94	6	-	100	-	-	100	-	-	97	3

Table 1. Private language use based on interlocutor (in %)

Furthermore, it can be observed that first-generation speakers reported using mainly Hungarian or both languages in all categories, while second-generation participants mostly indicated using both, whereas in the case of third-generation speakers mainly English seems to be used, with occasional occurrences of both languages together.

This tendency suggests a gradual shift from Hungarian-dominant to balanced and English-dominant interactions across the generations. Based on this, it can be argued that a three-generational language shift is in progress in the Hungarian communities of Toronto and Hamilton, corresponding to the general trend for most current immigrant varieties throughout North-America, suggested – among others – by Fishman (1966, 1991), Paulston (1981), and Veltman (1983).

Concerning the choice of language in the private spheres (praying, counting, swearing, thinking, and talking to animals) use of both languages together was found to be the most frequent answer. The signs of a three-generational language shift can be observed in this case as well, with Hungarian being the most widely used in the first generation, and the least widely used in the third. Use of Hungarian is predominant in *praying*, especially among first-generation speakers (87%), however, it diminishes through the next two generations. This might show that an activity so very personal as praying is connected very tightly to the language in which it was learnt.

3.2.2. Public spheres

In order to find out whether a loss of domains is perceptible in their Hungarian language use, the subjects were asked if they used Hungarian in various public spheres (see Figure 2) now, and whether they had used the language in these settings before. No specific time frame was set, since the focus was on whether they use Hungarian in fewer cases in the present as opposed to their earlier years in Canada. What is more, the sample of speakers was rather heterogeneous as far as age is concerned, so it would have been difficult to find a time span meaningful for all age groups.

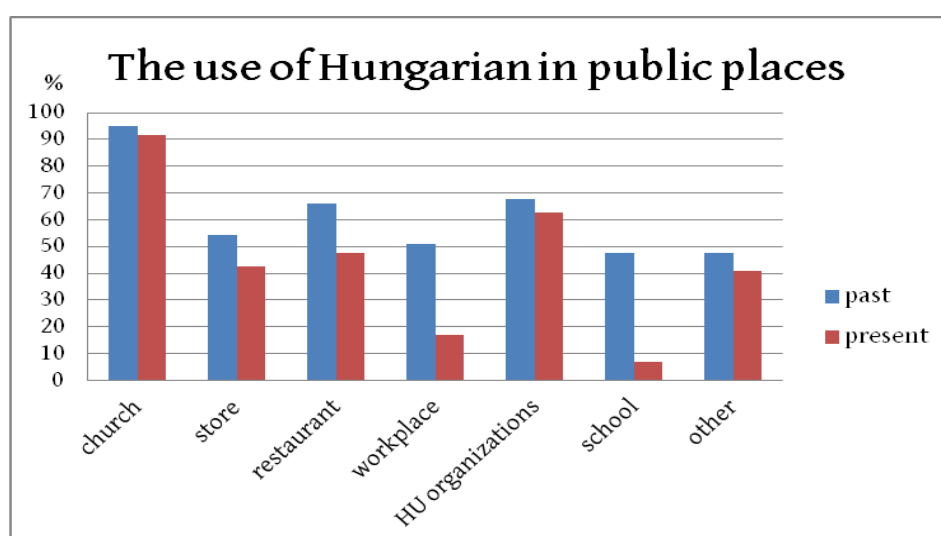


Figure 2. The use of Hungarian in public places

As Figure 2 shows, Hungarian is mainly used at church (92%) and in Hungarian organizations such as Hungarian clubs and cultural centers (63%), but also in restaurants (47%). However, a decrease in the use of Hungarian in public places can be noticed over time. This decrease is the most powerful in the case of workplace (from 51% to 17%) and school (from 47% to 7%), although the latter category is somewhat ambiguous because most of the participants do not attend school any more.

An exception to the rule is the use of the Hungarian language in Hungarian organizations, where an increase can be observed across the three generations (from 58% to 59% and 100%). The fact that there is an increase in this category in spite of the gradual loss of domains found elsewhere might exemplify the tendency of the second and the third generations becoming more interested in their heritage language, identity and culture as they get older, which is why they tend to seek contact with such organizations. It might also be argued, however, that in these

generations the heritage language and identity are only maintained by those who participate in these organizations.

3.3. *What levels of language proficiency do speakers report to have?*

Figure 3 illustrates the findings on speakers' self-reported language proficiency. Subjects were asked to choose which level of proficiency ("mother-tongue level", "very good", "good", "not very good", etc.) they thought they had in Hungarian, English, and any other language they spoke.

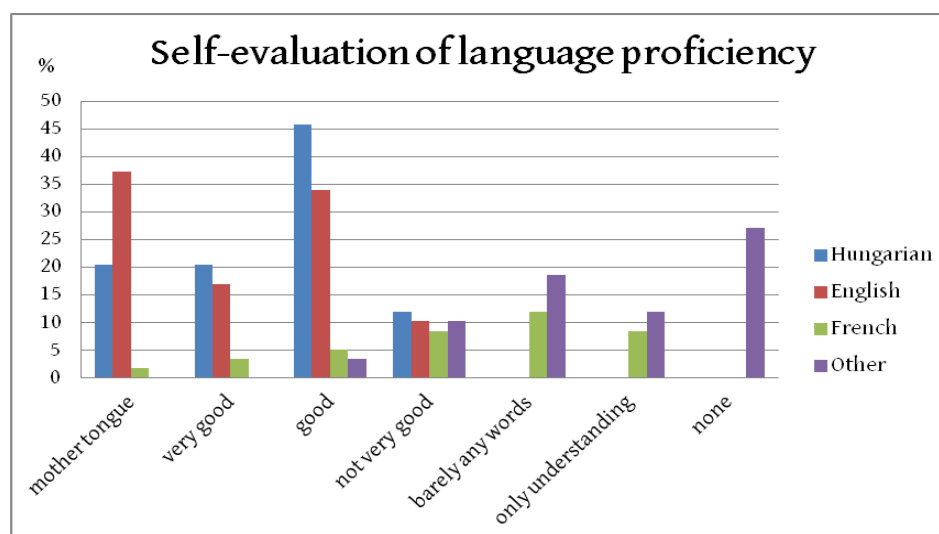


Figure 3. *Self-reported language proficiency of speakers*

We have to note that most participants seemed to underestimate their language proficiency in Hungarian, often apologizing for their "bad Hungarian", although they were all perfectly capable of carrying out the interview in fluent Hungarian. The subjects' self-evaluation suggests that all three generations are rather proficient in both Hungarian and English (with the categories "good", "very good" and "mother tongue" being the most frequent answers). However, a shift across the generations can be noticed. While first-generation speakers mostly report speaking Hungarian at a mother tongue level or very well (62%) and English only well (61%), the other two generations report speaking English at a mother tongue level (78%) and Hungarian only well (61%), which further supports the aforementioned suggestion of ongoing language shift.

3.4. *How does the regional and national attachment of the subjects manifest itself?*

Speakers were asked to evaluate their regional and national attachment on a scale of 1 ("not attached at all") to 5 ("very much attached"). Regarding their regional attachment, in general they reported to be the most attached to Canada,

then to their city, then their province Ontario, and the least to Hungary.

As far as an inter-generational comparison is concerned, a gradual decrease of attachment to Hungary can be seen across the generations, which is complemented on the other end by a slight increase in terms of attachment to Canada from the first generation to the second and third. This tendency implies that the shift in language goes along with some sort of a shift in attachment as well, although the latter is definitely much less obvious than the former. Another difference between the two is that while the three-generational language shift is doubtlessly gradual in nature and affects the second and third generations far more than the first, the shift in attachment already manifests itself in the first generation's being more attached to Canada than to Hungary, which implies that this kind of shift happens more rapidly than the gradual shift in language.

With regard to national attachment, speakers generally reported to be attached to the Hungarian nation, the Canadian nation, and the Canadian-Hungarian community to a largely similar extent (around 4 on a scale of 1 to 5). However, first-generation speakers exhibited more attachment to the Hungarian nation than to the Canadian one, while with second- and third-generation speakers it was just the other way around.

3.5. What attitudes do speakers have towards different varieties of Hungarian?

To examine their attitudes towards different varieties of Hungarian, participants were asked where they thought "the most beautiful" Hungarian was spoken. The possible answers included Budapest (the capital), other cities in Hungary, villages in Hungary, Transylvania (Romania), Vojvodina (Serbia), Subcarpathia (Ukraine), Southern Slovakia, Burgenland (Austria), the Mura region (Slovenia), and the immigrant communities in Canada.

Most speakers chose the Budapest variety, i.e. the standard (47% in total), followed by Transylvania (25%), Hungarian cities (22%), Hungarian villages (19%), and finally the Vojvodina variety (2%). (Some respondents marked more than one area in their answers, thus the percentages may add up to more than 100%.) These results show that Canadian-Hungarians tend to have more positive attitudes towards the standard than towards non-standard varieties, in contrast with Hungarians in Hungary, who ranked the varieties spoken in Hungarian cities and villages before the Budapest standard (Göncz, 1999: 269).

The Transylvanian non-standard variety constitutes an exception, being ranked second by Canadian-Hungarians, and only fourth by Hungarians in Hungary. First-generation Canadian-Hungarians ranked it even higher than the

Budapest variety. The Canadian-Hungarian variety, however, (being rather informal in nature) seems to have rather low prestige among the participants.

3.6. In what ways does the Canadian-Hungarian community compare to other Hungarian communities outside Hungary?

As mentioned earlier, the use of the same questionnaire as a data collection tool provides an opportunity to compare the Canadian-Hungarian community to other Hungarian communities. However, the Hungarian communities in question can be divided into two groups: Hungarian communities in the Carpathian Basin, which used to be part of the historical Hungary (before 1920), and diaspora or immigrant Hungarian communities. First, we will proceed with a comparison of immigrant communities in Canada and the US (based on Polgár, 2001). Second, the findings concerning the Canadian community will be compared to data reported on Hungarian in Slovakia (Lanstyák 2000), Ukraine (Csernicskó 1998) and Serbia (Göncz 1999), respectively.

3.6.1. Comparison to the US

When comparing the findings of the present study to data available on American-Hungarians, we need to take into consideration that, while the Canadian study considers a cross-section of three generations, the subjects of the American-Hungarian study (Polgár 2001) mainly consist of first-generation immigrants with only a few second-generation and no third-generation speakers.

Similarities between the two groups of respondents abound. In both settings family and school play the most important role in acquiring Hungarian, speakers all use both English and Hungarian in most of their conversations, exclusive use of Hungarian being mainly restricted to use in the immediate family, especially with older family members. The distribution of language choice in public spheres is also roughly the same in both settings with a slightly more loss of domain in the use of Hungarian in the case of American-Hungarians. Both communities showed similar patterns of regional and national attachment, exhibiting most attachment to the country of residence and their nation, respectively, and least attachment to Hungary.

Several differences in the accounts of the two groups were also found. With regard to private language use, American-Hungarians were found to use solely Hungarian in more situations than Canadian-Hungarians, who only reported preference for Hungarian for praying purposes. Another difference is that more American subjects reported a mother tongue level proficiency in Hungarian than in

English, while in Canada it was the other way around. Furthermore, American respondents favored the Budapest variety more than the Canadian respondents did, who also favored the Transylvanian variety – a non-standard, non-dominant variety, but idealized by many Hungarians (Benő & Szilágyi 2005).

Some of these differences can be explained by the distribution of the subjects involved. Most of the American respondents were first-generation speakers, who acquired Hungarian while still in Hungary. Therefore, they were more confident in their proficiency in Hungarian and would use Hungarian more often than the Canadian subjects, who exhibited a more bilingual-like behavior.

3.6.2. Comparison to countries neighboring Hungary

The main difference between these two settings is that while in Canada Hungarian does not have a long history, it is a long established language in the Carpathian Basin. Even though Hungarian is a minority language in each of these countries, in certain areas it is in fact a local majority language, therefore the main locus of language acquisition is the family, since no other institutions need to facilitate the acquisition of Hungarian.

Although language dominance is similar in both settings, Hungarian is more widely used in the Carpathian Basin than in Canada, which can be noticed within the family as well as in communication with friends and neighbors, in private spheres (praying, counting, swearing, thinking and talking to animals), and in some public spheres, such as stores (apart from the church and Hungarian organizations). This points to a stronger presence of Hungarian in the autochthonous regions than in the diaspora. At the same time, the predominant use of both languages in Canada points to a more balanced bilingualism or a greater influence of the majority language.

The results of self-evaluations of language proficiency reveal a contrasting pattern as well. Hungarians in Canada reported higher proficiency in English than in Hungarian, while Hungarians in the Carpathian Basin reported higher knowledge of Hungarian than knowledge of the respective majority language.

Further difference can be noticed concerning the regional attachment of the respondents. Canadian-Hungarians reported being most attached to their country of residence, while Hungarians in Slovakia, Ukraine and Serbia are the least attached to these countries. In addition, attachment to Hungary is also stronger among Hungarians in Canada than in the aforementioned countries. This may reflect that Hungarians in the Carpathian Basin have formed a distinct identity, distancing themselves both from Hungary and their country of residence and rather

identifying themselves as residents of southern Slovakia (considered a distinct region called *Felvidék* or “Upland” by Hungarians), Subcarpathia and Vojvodina, respectively. As regards national attachment, all Hungarians, except those in Ukraine, reported slightly stronger attachment to their local Hungarian communities than the Hungarian nation as a whole.

As for attitudes toward the different varieties of Hungarian, all respondents preferred the Budapest variety the most. The local varieties appeared to have high prestige among speakers from Ukraine and Serbia, who rated their regional variety as the first and third best variety, respectively, while all Canadian respondents considered their local variety to be of the lowest prestige. Interestingly enough, the Transylvanian variety, which is neither the standard nor the local variety of any of the subjects, was evaluated positively by all respondents (higher than the rural varieties spoken in Hungary).

4. Summary

The present paper focuses on the situation of Hungarian in Canada by providing a macro-sociolinguistic analysis of two Hungarian communities living in the Hamilton and Toronto areas. We concluded that in these settings the most important loci of acquisition of Hungarian are family and school, but church and scouting can also play an important role. Regarding the domains of language use, the results showed that Hungarian is more dominant in the private spheres, while English is more dominant in the public spheres. Further analysis showed that even though Canadian-Hungarians demonstrated a strong attachment to Hungary and to their Hungarian culture and in spite of the desire to keep their culture and language alive, a shift to English could be observed through loss of domains of Hungarian among second- and third-generation speakers.

As the final issue we addressed the similarities and differences among various Hungarian communities in the Carpathian Basin and in North America. Based on the answers provided by Hungarians in Slovakia, Ukraine, Serbia, the US and Canada, it can be concluded that even though there are common points for all communities, the communities in the Carpathian Basin differ on several points from the communities overseas. In spite of some differences, the results of the Canadian community are closest to the American community. Therefore, from a macro-sociolinguistic point of view we can differentiate between Hungarian in the Carpathian Basin and Hungarian in North America.

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