CSILLA BARTHA

Language Ideologies, Discriminatory Practices and the Deaf Community in Hungary
Language Ideologies, Discriminatory Practices and the Deaf Community in Hungary
0. Abstract

1. Medical versus cultural constructions of d/Deafness

2. Definitions of Deaf community and Deaf culture: sociolinguistic perspective

3. Situation in Hungary

   3.1. Some data

   3.2. Legislation: Disability versus minority rights paradigm

   3.3. Situation of the Deaf community

   3.4. Education and Hungarian Sign Language

   3.5. Mainstream attitudes toward and ideologies of deafness and sign languages in Hungary

4. Prospect for change?

0. Abstract

Although there are about 60 thousand Deaf people in Hungary constituting the third largest linguistic minority, their bilingual and bicultural linguistic minority status has been neglected both in professional and public discourse. Furthermore, many Hungarian linguists disagree with the fact that HSL is an autonomous linguistic system different from Hungarian. In academic, political, and educational discourse the term ‘deaf community’ refers to all people with serious hearing impairment, according to the medically-based model of ‘the disability community’ in order to legitimate the oralist, acculturational ideology of Deafness. The pathological view which considers deafness as an illness to be erased encounters in Hungarian culture and society with discrimination and stereotypes.

Until recently linguistic and sociolinguistic research on Deaf people and their sign languages has been a very poorly studied scientific area in Hungary. After presenting an overview of the main sociolinguistic, socio-psychological, ideological questions as well as educational policy, legislation and public discourse concerning the Deaf in Hungary, I will
analyze how and why dominant group implements social, media and educational policies aimed at constructing and reconstructing “normal” perceptions to the advantage of their own identity needs. I argue further that sign-rejecting, Hungarian-only educational practice correlate not only with the medically-based concepts of "normal" vs "disabled", but rather, with the ideology of monolingualism as "the normal state of being" emerging from the ideology of nationalism. Sources of evidence come from the following studies:

1) a pilot study on contextualized as well as decontextualized folk evaluations of "bilingualism", “deafness”, and “sign languages”

2) a national survey on linguistic and social change in six linguistic minorities in Hungary (Dimensions of linguistic otherness: Prospects of minority language maintenance in Hungary)
1. Medical versus cultural constructions of d/Deafness

Disability has always been part of the human conditions, however, societies’ response may have varied country by country. Deafness has also been a thematized category for a long time in the human history.

Two competing paradigms influenced prominently both scientific and public discourse: the medical-pathological versus antropological-cultural interpretations. Nonetheless, the two-polar approach to the concept of Deafness, though essential, is not complete. There seemed to be other, interrelated constructions in modern societies including psychology, linguistics, education, sociology, cultural and legislation perspectives etc.

Deafness as a topic is a social construction. From sociolinguistic perspective, the most important dimension of categorization how Deaf people as members of the Deaf community and Deaf culture articulate their Deaf identity in opposition with either the lay or the professional hearing world.

2. Definitions of Deaf community and Deaf culture: sociolinguistic perspective

There are several definitions of the concept established for medical, educational, legal etc. purposes, respectively. The widely used interpretation of the term is the inability to hear, although, it is only an umbrella term for different levels of hearing capacity and ways hearing loss emerged.

However, it is inevitably important to make a clear distinction between pre-lingual and post-lingual deafness. Furthermore, there are also serious scientific considerations that make the distinction between deaf, especially pre-lingual deaf and hard of hearing very important: these groups should be treated differently as far as their problems, needs and interests are concerned. I will focus on pre-lingual deafness and for those who have no usable hearing. Henceforth I will focus on the pre-lingual Deaf population of Hungary.
Taking Deafness as a social, cultural and linguistic phenomenon, a state of being including a group of people who share a perception of the world through an emphasis on visual and kinesthetic input. **Deafness here creates a cultural, social and linguistic minority**, signified by the use of a capital 'D'.

To the Deaf, the main thing that distinguishes the hearing person from the Deaf is the language they prefer to use, hence, the physiological capability to hear is conceived as another, but less significant, difference between the two cultures. The Deaf are also aware that their culture has been the target of several oppressive attempts, where "oralism", the "pedagogical" practice of forcing deaf children to be mastered in speech and speech-reading while forbidding the use of sign language, is the most disrelished (cf. Cherney 1999). Needless to say that the notion of "oralism" soon became the symbol of the "others" who removed from the Deaf interests and goals eliminating Deaf culture through oppressive attitudes and practices fitting the disabled body as much as possible in the "normal" society.

At the same time, I would stress that "Hearing Culture" and "Deaf Culture" are not mutually exclusive social-cultural constructions. As with many ethnic-linguistic minorities, many Deaf people may not only be bilingual but bicultural negotiating multiple social identities, participating in both "worlds", belonging to hearing as well as Deaf social networks.

3. Situation in Hungary

3.1. Some data

We hardly find reliable statistical data concerning the deaf population in the country. There are estimated to be about 3-400000 deaf and hard of hearing persons in Hungary, that is about 3-4% of the total population. About 60000 of these are profoundly or severely deaf. The people grow older the chances of becoming deaf increase: 10% of the total population suffer from hearing loss in certain degree.

According to other estimates, 66000 children under the age 16 are hearing impaired. Children with residual hearing and profound hearing loss can be found in deaf schools, in special schools for hard of hearing, and occasionally, in mainstream schools.
A great proportion of working-age deaf people are unemployed or have jobs with low prestige. 50% of them between age 18-39 and 80% in the group of age 40-59 receive disability pension, 80% of the minimum old-age pension. Hence deaf and seriously hearing impaired people who are not employed would rather be working if a suitable job could be found. Deaf women are particularly victimized by job discrimination.

3.2. Legislation: Disability versus minority rights paradigm

There are two main legislative options approaching Deafness: to treat Deaf people as disabled under the provision of disability/equal opportunities acts or declaring them legally a distinct linguistic minority empowering it with individual as well as collective rights.

Documents in the first case also emphasize that people with disabilities should have the right to mainstream education as well as parents of disabled children should have the right to participate in planning and provision of their children’s education.

Fundamental elements of the second legislative option are the language and mother tongue status of sign languages and the right to education through the medium of SL as a linguistic human right. Although many efforts have been made, Deaf minorities are not under the provision of international legal instruments protecting national minorities. Certainly, there are additional legal instruments that ensure a number of linguistic rights all persons in the state should enjoy (e.g. freedom of expression, the right in criminal procedures to be informed of the charge against them in a language they understand through interpreter provided free of charge); or rights related to minorities by virtue their minority status. Yet, educational linguistic human rights have special relevance for minority protection, thus for the Deaf minority, too.

The state policy regarding Deaf people, legislative framework applied in a given country correlate highly with the degree of acceptance of multicultural and multiethnic values. Nonetheless, whatever approach is adopted in whatever legislative framework in whatever context, a critical point must be the key role of sign language(s) in education. Deaf children should have access to their sign languages. The Salamanca Statement (para 21) gives a clear
statement about the importance of sign languages, furthermore, **Rule 5 of the UN Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities** makes a clear statement about accessibility to information and communication:

In Hungary, we have no law that would support the Deaf perspective concerning, at least, education. Debate on the recognition of HSL was never put on the agenda of **Parliament of Hungary**. As far as the linguistic and educational rights of the Deaf are concerned, the following documents make concessions on the question of sign language use or tolerate it to a certain extent: (OH, slide 3)

*Act No. 1. of 1973 on criminal procedure*
*Act No. XXXIII. of 1992 on the legal status of civil servants*
*Government Decree on implementation of the Act No. XXXIII. of 1992 on the legal status of civil servants in public education (138/1992 (X. 8.)*
*Act No. LXXIX of 1993 on public education*
*Departmental Order (Ministry of Education) on publishing the Guiding principles of pre-school education of disabled children and Guiding principles of educating disabled children (with two Appendices)*
*Act No. XXVI. of 1998 on provision of the rights of persons living with disability and their equality of opportunity*
*Parliament Decree on the National Disability Affairs Programme (100/1999. (XII. 10.) and Appendix*
*Government Decree 2062/2000. (III.24.) on the medium term action plan concerning the implementation of the National Disability Affairs Programme*

There are six legal documents where variations of the term sign language occur It is worth to note that one of the most influential document for the future status of the Deaf community in Hungary, the **Parliament Decree on the National Disability Affairs Programme (100/1999. (XII. 10.)** avoids the term "sign language" and prefers to use "signing”. The choice of this term symbolizes of the generally accepted non-language conception of Hungarian Sign Language (HSL).

At the end of 1998 the Hungarian Parliament passed a law (No. XXVI. of 1998) on **provision of the rights of persons living with disability and their equality of opportunity** providing equal access of disabled persons in Hungary. This law assigns rights to the very
heterogenous group of "disabled people" with respect for education/training, employment, social welfare, special services, rehabilitation etc.

As part of our project we made a critical analysis of the legal texts in question, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, we are gathering data on the problems of implementation as well as violation.

3.3. Situation of the Deaf communities

Provision of services to hearing impaired people can be linked at least to two main sectors of contributors: the voluntary sector and the state provision based on legislation, parliamentary records etc.

In the last few years, new initiatives were set up on hearing impairment. Nevertheless, in these programs and policy enactments deaf people are rather passive recipients of welfare services as part of a medically-based normalizing process. Even though many of these services are of great importance for the majority of people with hard of hearing, unexceptionally hearing policy makers ignore the role and needs of D/deaf people.

In spite of the guaranteed "reasonable adjustment" in application process to enable persons with disability to compete on an equal level with non-disabled candidates, a great proportion of working-age deaf people are unemployed or have jobs with low prestige. Employers` negative attitudes, their misguided notions on deafness as well as inadequate knowledge of the "Equal Opportunities Act" are essential barriers faced by deaf people who are looking for job. Employers usually associate severe hearing loss with mental impairment considering these people untrustworthy; they are convinced that deaf people will often be absent from work; it is a widely held belief that creative use of technology, job accommodations would be too costly. Deaf employees usually not enjoy equal access to promotions, vocational and in-service training.

Communication and information access are essential problems of the Deaf. In principle, deaf people have the right to sign language interpretation free of charge in different areas of social life, in effect, many of them have serious communication problems when
visiting the doctor, dentist, receiving treatments in hospital; having conversations with lawyers, potential employers, at a tax office or insurance company etc. Furthermore, many cultural events, church services, meetings in the labour market, other public gatherings, debates etc. are inaccessible to them.

There are no regular special TV programs for the Deaf. **Subtitling is available on only a narrow range of programs.** Besides the lacking **closed caption teletext services, teletext video recorders and decoders, multimedia technologies, computer and Internet, as well as textphones and videophones in which Deaf people are able to communicate in sign language, or even simple fax machines, mobile phones and SMS systems, without at least partial reimbursement, are unattainable for many Deaf.**

**Hungarian Deaf community has no relay service.**

Although **sign language interpretation** had existed for many years in Hungary, until recently, the profession of "sign language interpreter" has not been officially recognized. In 1998, there were only 38 interpreters, most of them are free-lancer interpreters. Authorization process is in progress. Interpreter training is carried on by Bárczi College of ELTE, the fundamental institutional center of the oralist-pathological paradigm.

Education is the most serious problem Deaf families have to face. **Deaf people have less educational opportunities than their hearing counterparts.** Besides oral method there is no alternative option for Deaf education, consequently parents, in fact, are not fully and objectively informed neither about the educational possibilities nor the nature of HSL. The only educational choice means mainstreaming or not.

### 3.3. Education and Hungarian Sign Language

**Deaf education** in Hungary is based strongly upon **oralist principles. Teachers officially prohibit children the use of any gestural code, at least in the first, critical phase of the education process,** because it is considered detrimental to learning Hungarian. Although many Deaf pupils aware school ignorance of their linguistic, cultural heritage, they prefer to use HSL among each other, when they are out, at home, at play etc. Children report that when
a teacher uses — not officially — some HSL or signed Hungarian — to explain Hungarian grammar or another subject, it makes easier for them to learn and write. Deaf parents also give an account of the fact that their children need help and additional explanations in HSL at home.

Naturally occurring bilingualism of children has been completely left out of consideration in school context, although they show variability in terms of competence, language skills and attitudes toward HSL and Hungarian language, respectively. Deaf language users constitute a bilingual proficiency continuum from HSL monolingualism through varying types of HSL-Hungarian bilingualism in terms of competence and modalities to Hungarian monolingualism.

Since curricular content of basic education has been constantly overlooked in favor of an effort to teach oral Hungarian, this situation lead to a deficit of basic educational necessities. Furthermore, and more importantly, these children are denied full acquisition of their first language during their school years. In addition, the training of intellect, the developing of mental capacities, and the developing of the students’ personalities are inevitably relegated into the background.

There are 7 special elementary schools for the deaf. Most of the teachers are hearing, female educators. In these schools, there is an increase in numbers with age starting at 3-5 and finishing at 10-14. After the age of 15 there is a dramatic decline.

As far as the secondary, tertiary and higher education are concerned, picture drawn officially is much more positive than reality. Teaching methods and conditions of primary schools for the deaf predertermine students’ prospects in their further studies. Their chances for studying in institutions of higher education are regrettably limited. Although most of deaf students are able to participate in vocational training, there are only 2-3 deaf and 5-6 hard of hearing students who are enrolled in comprehensive schools per year. Being Deaf and getting a university diploma is rather exceptional in Hungary. Educational facilities and support services are not accessible for Deaf students, neither educational interpreters and notetakers who could ease acquiring academic information.
Although most hearing teachers can be characterized by complete lack of knowledge of HSL, Deaf adults and the Deaf community are hardly involved in education. The very few Deaf staff members are often ex-pupils of the school and it is rare for them to have any formal qualifications beyond whatever was obtained during schooling.

"Professional" sign-rejecting attitude of teachers on Deaf children’s self-evaluation and identity construction may cause detrimental effects: "Very soon, the children who had previously been proud of their useful heritage lost pride in their not-highly-valued language proficiency and adopted their teachers’. […] This mental shift was not difficult to achieve, since the children were unconsciously aware that their parents were not formally well-educated nor very successful in academic terms." (Muzsmai 1999:286)

The only effective education option for at least 25-30% of children with profound hearing loss would be a sign language based bilingual program that is entirely lacking from deaf schools in Hungary.

3.4. Mainstream attitudes toward and ideologies of deafness and sign languages in Hungary

Although there are about 60 thousand Deaf people in Hungary constituting the third largest linguistic minority, their bilingual and bicultural linguistic minority status has been neglected both in professional and public discourse. Furthermore, many Hungarian linguists disagree with the fact that HSL is an autonomous linguistic system different from Hungarian. In academic, political, and educational discourse the term ‘deaf community’ refers to all people with serious hearing impairment, according to the medically-based model of ‘the disability community’ in order to legitimate the oralist, acculturational ideology of Deafness. The pathological view which considers deafness as an illness to be erased encounters in Hungarian culture and society with discrimination and stereotypes.

There is little understanding of its classification, linguistic implications or appropriate educational intervention. Hearing people’s conceptions may vary along the level of involvement in Deafness and with Deaf people.
Between November 2000 and April 2001, I made a pilot study among university students of attitudes, stereotypes and misconceptions regarding deafness. Respondents were students of the Eötvös Loránd University at the Faculty of Arts who were attending my lectures. Students had to complete a questionnaire in the first occasion without having previous scientific information on the subject in question. Questionnaire had two main parts. Questions in the first section focused on the respondents implicit knowledge and ideas of deafness and bilingualism, respectively. In the second part I tried to scope out the dynamics of current myths and misconceptions present in everyday as well as in professional discourses. I also analyzed academic discourse regarding deafness and the status of sign languages.

Answers correlate highly with my presumptions: 1) Deafness was generally viewed and represented medically, as restriction, lack of ability, a defect to be ameliorated by special techniques and technologies 2) HSL (and other sign languages) was (were) not regarded as “real”, full-fledged natural language(s); 3) bilingualism was accounted ambiguously; 4) with respect to the concepts of inclusion and difference, university students delineated them more liberally than the average population.

Results also proved my hypothesis that segments of a given society can be placed along a continuum regarding their ideologies, interpretations of and responses to the concepts of “deafness” and disability in general influenced by their socio-economic (age, education, sex, settlement etc.), medical (disabled or not) status, experience and personal interest.

Analysis of academic discourse revealed that sign-rejecting, Hungarian-only educational practice correlate not only with the medically-based concepts of "normal" vs "disabled", but rather, with the ideology of monolingualism as "the normal state of being" emerging from the ideology of nationalism. Evaluations in academic discourse are linked very much with mainstream society’s conceptions and expectations concerning “a real language” versus bilingualism. I summarized these language ideologies on my handout (PAGE )
On sign language

1. Sign languages can develop and change. (88,1%)
2. Deaf people from different countries can mutually understand each other through signing. (84,9%)
3. The great majority of deaf children are born of deaf parents. (73%)
4. Integration into the hearing society is conceivable only through adequate knowledge of the Hungarian language. (61,5%)
5. Teaching or communicating with deaf people through the medium of spoken language is the most effective way of information exchange. (53%)
6. Sign languages are artificially developed by educators of the deaf in order to ease acquisition of the spoken language. (52,4%)
7. Sign languages are pantomime-like, gestural systems. (47,5%)
8. Communication with a deaf person is more effective with the help of a sign language interpreter. (47,2%)
9. Bilingualism in sign language and the national spoken language can cause confusion and problems in the person’s cognitive and emotional development. (35%)
10. Sign language helps deaf people to develop mentally and intellectually. (34,4%)
11. Deaf children can learn on equal terms with hearing children when they have access to sign language. (29%)
12. Sign languages are natural human languages with their own grammar, independent of any spoken language. (27%)
13. Deaf people can be considered a linguistic and cultural minority. (23%)

On deafness

1. Speech is not the single mode of communication. (96%)
2. The Equal Opportunities Act assigns equal employment for people with disabilities. (84%)
3. Deafness implies delayed speech and learning disability. (78,4%)
4. Deaf and hard-of-hearing people are a small portion of the population in Hungary. (73%)
5. Hearing aid is the single solution for the deaf of their integration into the hearing society. (72%)
6. Deafness affects mostly older people. (63,7%)
7. Deaf children can become independent adults. (56,4%)
8. Deaf people cannot be employed in ordinary jobs. (55%)
9. People with hearing impairment are much more integrated into the Hungarian society than they were before. (54.7%)
10. Deafness goes hand in hand with mental retardation or stubbornness. (54.5%)
11. Deafness is simply a medical problem, to be treated by audiologists and surdopedagogists in the hope of a cure. (53%)
12. Deafness is an unusual, pathological condition. (51.2%)
13. Deafness is basically a health issue. (49.6%)
14. Deaf people (and people with other disabilities) can get financial assistance from the government, and so they don’t want to work. (43.1%)
15. Deafness is the general term to talk about a wide range of hearing impairments. (43%)
16. Mainstreaming of deaf children leads to classroom disruption and lower educational standards. (32.1%)
17. Deafness begin at birth or in early childhood. (30.2%)
18. Deaf children can never communicate. (8%)

4. Prospect of change?

In fact, the debate on the question "Minority or disability law for the Deaf ?" has only started recently in Hungary. There is a narrow circle of professionals alongside with a few Deaf activists lobbying for raising awareness of Deaf minority and Hungarian Sign Language. Among the preparatory steps for beginning of any implementation in this field, the most important activities should be the standardization of the national sign language, transformation of both regular and special needs education teacher training, educating a sufficient numbers of interpreters, even providing learning facilities of hearing parents of Deaf children, continuous research on all aspects of the life of the Deaf community. In this recognition process, forming mainstream attitudes and ideas seems to be fundamental.

Besides basic research, the overall aim of our academic work is to elaborate different strategic tools in order to help transforming the conceptual formulation of and social response to D/deafness.