

# Personal Notes on Hungarian American Bilingualism Research<sup>1</sup>

Miklós Kontra

**Abstract:** In 1967, linguist John Lotz, born in Milwaukee but raised mostly in Hungary, called attention to the lack of research on Hungarian American bilingualism at a time when monographs and PhD dissertations described, in great detail, the bilingualism of Norwegian, Greek, Polish, and Finnish people in the US. When I became an associate instructor of Hungarian at Indiana University, Bloomington, in 1978, I embarked on *The Project on Hungarian American Bilingualism in South Bend, Indiana*. As a result, eighty hours of Hungarian speech and sixty hours of English were recorded, and a book appeared in Hungarian in 1990. Not much later, in 1995, I was involved with the publication of *Beyond Castle Garden: An American Hungarian Dictionary of the Calumet Region*, compiled and written by Andrew Vázsonyi. The personal reflections comprising this article will deal with some important issues concerning fieldwork in South Bend and will offer a brief characterization of the differences between Hungarian American bilingualism in the 1970s and today. [kontram@gmail.com](mailto:kontram@gmail.com)

**Keywords:** *bilingualism, Hungarian American bilingualism, fieldwork in South Bend (Indiana), differences in Hungarian American bilingualism between the 1970s and today*

**Biography:** Miklós Kontra, PhD, is emeritus professor of Hungarian linguistics, Károli Gáspár University, Budapest. In 1978–81 he taught Hungarian at Indiana University, Bloomington. In 1992–93 he was a visiting Fulbright scholar at Indiana, and in 1995–96 he held an ACLS fellowship at Michigan State University where he returned as a Fulbright scholar in 2003. He conducted substantial linguistic fieldwork in the Hungarian community of South Bend, Indiana, and in 1990 published *Fejezetek a South Bend-i magyar nyelvhasználatból* (Chapters on Hungarian Language Use in South Bend) (Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Nyelvtudományi Intézete, 1990). He is the coeditor of the online publication *Tanulmányok a budapesti beszédről* (Studies on Budapest Speech) (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 2021): <https://nytud.hu/kiadvany/tanulmanyok-a-budapesti-beszedrol-a-budapesti-szociolingvisztikai-interju-alapjan>).

## Introduction

Let me begin by briefly recalling how I got into the business of studying Hungarian American bilingualism. In the fall of 1978, I became the associate instructor of Hungarian at Indiana

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on my lecture given at the "Hungarian as a Heritage Language in the US" conference at Cleveland State University on March 26, 2022. Thanks are due to the anonymous reviewer's helpful remarks.



University, Bloomington. I came into this job, like all my predecessors, from Hungary, a country behind the Iron Curtain. Soon after I started teaching in Bloomington,

I asked my students where they were from. A guy called Joe Szaday told me he came from South Bend, where he was among quite a few Hungarians.

"Good, I said. Do you know the Hungarian priest?"

"No."

"Can you get me his name and address?"

"Yes."

A week later I had a Hungarian Catholic priest's name and address. I sent him a letter introducing myself and my plan to study the Hungarians in South Bend.

When I first arrived at Indiana University, I didn't know how to make the best of my stay. After a few weeks, I re-read John Lotz's<sup>2</sup> 1967 paper. (One could do so easily in Bloomington, where the Hungarian section of the university's main library is phenomenal—one of the best, if not the best, in the US.) In it he lamented that good research on Hungarian American bilingualism was practically nonexistent; quite a different situation in comparison to the abundance of good books and PhD dissertations on Norwegian American, Greek American, Polish American, and Finnish American bilingualism. Well, I thought, I could do something with Hungarian Americans since I was there and had an opportunity to do so. Thus, I began what I later called *The Project on Hungarian American Bilingualism in South Bend, Indiana*. It was fortuitous that I had done so, because a few decades later the traditional Hungarian American neighborhoods had diffused into the American melting pot.

## Fieldwork

Let me turn to some aspects of my—or, rather, *our*—fieldwork. From 1979 to 1981 my research associate was Greg Nehler, a graduate student of Hungarian in Bloomington. His Hungarian was extremely good, due in no small part to his having been a visiting student, for a year, at my university in Szeged. Greg and I conducted sociolinguistic interviews with scores of Hungarian Americans, mainly in South Bend, but also in the Calumet Region south of Chicago. I conducted

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<sup>2</sup> John Lotz was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1913. He received most of his school and university education in Hungary. After World War II he was professor of linguistics at Columbia University, and later he was director of the Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, D.C., between 1967 and 1971. He died in 1973 in Chevy Chase, Maryland. See

<https://www.nytimes.com/1973/08/28/archives/dr-john-lotz-60-linguist-is-dead-former-columbia-professor-led.html>

the Hungarian interviews while Greg conducted the English interviews. The plan was to study respondents' Hungarian as well as their English.

Right from the beginning we were telling white lies to our respondents; for example, "Greg does not know Hungarian but is interested in things Hungarian." I introduced this "research rule" because I wanted to record the best English that respondents could use, thus preventing them from switching to Hungarian when they felt the need to do so. However, this "research rule" caused two problems:

1. Often Greg found himself in the nearly impossible situation of having to feign no knowledge of Hungarian, even when respondents were cracking hilarious jokes. After a few interviews, Greg told me he couldn't possibly play the role any longer and would go back to Bloomington. Thank God he did not.
2. Some of our respondents suspected that Greg did indeed know Hungarian and would even say so when Greg was out of earshot. This had become a serious methodological problem, but we finally were lucky enough to conduct some excellent interviews, in not only Hungarian but also in English.

Apart from speech recorded in interviews, the field linguist also strives to record speech in other situations, as in my case I did, for example, after a Catholic Mass in front of the church and, in one instance, in somebody's backyard, where a person was boasting about his newly installed sprinkling system to friends. When I had checked the latter tape a few hours after having done the recording, I heard one of the most precious pieces of Hungarian linguistic data that I had ever encountered in my life. All the books on the history of Hungarian tell us that word-initial consonant clusters in the models of foreign words become reduced in Hungarian; e.g., German *Schwager* > Hungarian *sógor* (brother-in-law). What books don't say anything about is how this actually happens. Now, in this case, and this is on tape, the American-born son of the immigrant said, in perfect Midwestern English:

"See my new sprinkling system? How d'you like it?"

And his father's best friend, a refugee from the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, responded:

"Yeah, new prinkling system, very good."

I had captured (and taped) word-initial consonant cluster reduction in the making; with speaker and hearer caught red-handed.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Sándor (1996: 15), in her Hungarian review of Vázsonyi (1995), voiced similar experiences: "Perhaps I won't be the only [linguist] who has learned more about how language works from this single book than from the tens of thousands of pages of textbooks, monographs, and articles I had read in the ten years prior to Easter 1994. This book didn't tell, it transmitted. It didn't speculate, it demonstrated. It changed the relationship between the reader and the book's subject from one between *I* and *It* to one between *I* and *You*." (Translation by the author.) (Original Hungarian: "Talán nem én leszek az egyedüli, akinek ez az egyetlenegy könyv többet megtanított a nyelv

One more thing deserves mention. The field linguist should be prepared to conduct interviews in situations in which no one has ever conducted an interview before. After I returned to Hungary in 1981, I didn't have the opportunity to record any Hungarian American speech. However, in 1987, at the Sixth International Conference on Methods in Dialectology, hosted by the University College of North Wales (today Bangor University),

I became friends with Dennis Preston, "the loud Hungarian" at the conference. I wanted to interview him because he seemed to be the quintessential US-born child of Hungarian immigrant parents. Dennis said he had no time for the interview. So I approached his wife, Carol, who did the best she could, in the interests of sociolinguistics, to set up an interview for me one day at 5:50 p.m. I went to their hotel room with my microphone and recorder only to learn that Dennis was taking a shower before we were all to attend a party beginning at 6 sharp. What could I do? I stuck my nonwaterproof mic into the shower cubicle and began my interview with this question:

"Tell me, how was it being brought up as a Hunky<sup>4</sup> child in southern Illinois?"

I like to think that this is the only, or at least the first, sociolinguistic interview ever conducted with the respondent in a shower.

### **The Iron Curtain**

During my three years at Indiana University (1978–81), I was constantly aware of the Iron Curtain and its consequences. This was my only opportunity to profit as a linguist from my experience of having lived there. I learned what I could in classes with professors Fred Householder, Allen Grimshaw, Alo Raun, and others. I xeroxed huge quantities of books and articles. I did fieldwork with Hungarian Americans and took about 120 audio cassette recordings back to Hungary. It was the chance of a lifetime: few Hungarian linguists had spent more than a month or two in the US in the 1960s and 1970s; maybe a dozen. Nobody, not even Hungarian professors of American studies, had spent as much as three years in a row in the US.

### **American English at Heathrow Airport in 1981**

In August 1981, when I was traveling back to Hungary from the US, I had checked two pieces of luggage and carried a smallish carry-on suitcase in my hand. The carry-on contained 120 audio cassettes; the fruits of my linguistic fieldwork in South Bend. They were very precious to me, so I didn't check them. I carried them successfully through customs at Chicago's O'Hare airport,

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működéséről, azaz a nyelvről, mint az a ki tudja hány ezer oldal tankönyv, monográfia, tanulmány, amit az 1994 húsvétját megelőző 10 évben elolvastam. Nem elmondta: átadta. Nem spekulált, hanem bemutatott. Az Én-Ő viszonyt Én-Te viszonyná alakította az olvasó és a könyv tárgya között.")

<sup>4</sup> Formerly an ethnic slur widely used in the United States referring to Eastern European immigrants, and in particular those from Hungary.

then at Montreal; "no X-rays.", I simply explained to customs that I wanted them hand-checked. Now, there was only the last, short leg of my trip to Budapest; just a two-hour flight from Heathrow, to go. *Easy*, I thought.

I came up to customs and said, "I'd like to have these hand-checked, please."

"It's gonna be hand-checked, anyway, because you're Hungarian," said the customs man. I certainly was a Hungarian, and these were the Iron Curtain years.

"Open it up," he added, in an unfriendly way.

"What is this?"

I figured that if I said to him something like, "taped speech of bilingual Hungarian Americans," he would not understand. So, I said: "American English."

"American English? There's no such thing!"

"Sir, if you haven't heard it yet, you can at least look at it now."

And he let me go.

### **Inaccessible Respondents**

When, in the first days of January in 1991, I took about forty copies of my book on South Bend Hungarians' bilingualism (Kontra 1990, reviewed in English by Huseby-Darvas 1992 and Kerek 1992) to South Bend, there was a small book launch in the basement of Our Lady of Hungary Church, where I gave a copy to each of my living respondents and the children of those who had passed away by then. I loved every minute of this trip, and the many people who came to the event were also very happy. Monsignor Elmer G. Peterson (for the complications in Americanizing his name, see Kontra 1995: 121), my major contact with the Hungarian community from day one of the project, even arranged for the *South Bend Tribune* to run an article (with a picture of the book) one day before the event (Borlik 1991).

At the book launch I autographed copies to "Old-Timers"—that is, Hungarians who had immigrated around World War I—then '56-ers, and the US-born children of these immigrants. In other words, three groups of respondents of the planned four received copies of the book to which they had contributed invaluable linguistic data. The missing group, with which we could not conduct a single interview, comprised the DPs or Displaced Persons, Hungarian professionals who had immigrated after World War II under the Displaced Persons Act of 1948. Why we could not interview DPs in 1979–81 became clear to me only the day after the book launch in 1991, when Monsignor Peterson asked me: "Miklós, would you like to come with me tomorrow when we have our monthly gathering and lunch at restaurant X?" Of course I was happy to go. There were about a dozen men at this lunch, some of whom were former Hungarian army officers, while others were lawyers, doctors, or engineers. They were all DPs. This was the regular monthly Hungarian DP meeting. I soon recognized most of the faces in attendance; these



were people I had seen at the Hungarian Catholic Mass many times, but I didn't know their names and had never talked to them. They were the DPs in South Bend who would never talk to a Hungarian with a Hungarian passport during the Cold War, but now that the Iron Curtain had fallen, they felt safe talking to me. In my book I had demonstrated some linguistic differences between the three major social groups: Old-Timers, '56-ers, and US-born Hungarians. Whether DPs showed any linguistic differences from these three groups is unlikely to be discovered in the future, since most DPs have since passed away.

## Hungarian language is kept alive in book

By KATHY BORLIK  
Tribune Staff Writer

SOUTH BEND

The ethnic neighborhoods from the early part of this century are shrinking or are gone completely.

Colorful customs have all but disappeared. And the languages of the homelands are no longer spoken in church, in the market and on the street.

Miklos Kontra has done his best to capture the ways the Hungarian language was used in South Bend.

Kontra, of the Linguistics Institute, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, recently published the scholarly book "The Hungarian Language as Spoken in South Bend, Indiana."

The book followed research and interviews conducted in 1980 and 1981 in South Bend while he was a professor of Hungarian at Indiana University, Bloomington.

He left South Bend with 120 hours of cassette tapes and plenty of information.

Kontra returned this week to meet with the people he studied and to give them a copy of the book.

The books are being distributed

from 4 to 6 p.m. today and Wednesday at Our Lady of Hungary Church, 829 W. Calvert St.

Kontra said while he was in Bloomington he decided he would have to do the study soon, before the immigrants from the early 1900s would die.

"Fifty years ago, the language was spoken in neighborhoods (around St. Stephen Catholic Church and Our Lady of Hungary Catholic Church). It was spoken in the streets. There were Hungarian newspapers. It was spoken in butcher shops and other businesses. That community structure is gone," he said.

The language isn't spoken by most third-generation Hungarians. "The melting pot is unavoidable," he said.

"There were no serious studies of language (in immigrants), and what happens in the Hungarian-American mind in terms of linguistics," he said.

The professor said South Bend is one of the "10 best or in the top six of cities" to conduct a study of the Hungarian language. Other cities on the list include Pittsburgh

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Tribune Photo/ JOE RAYMOND

Miklos Kontra shows some of the photographs in his book on the Hungarian language in South Bend.

*South Bend Tribune*, January 15, 1991

### A Prediction

In my review of Éva Huseby-Darvas's excellent book *Hungarians in Michigan*, published in 2003 (Kontra 2004), I tried to summarize the major differences between early and mid-twentieth-century, "old" Hungarians and late twentieth-century and twenty-first-century, "new" Hungarians, as was carefully documented by Huseby-Darvas. The old Hungarians were mainly blue-collar workers, whereas the new Hungarians are mostly professionals or people employed in the service industries. The old Hungarians had built Hungarian neighborhoods close to the factories and mines where they earned their meager livings; these neighborhoods had Hungarian churches, stores, taverns, and, often, a *Magyar Ház* (Hungarian cultural center). These neighborhoods were geographically well separated: the Buckeye Road neighborhood in Cleveland, Rum Village in South Bend, Hazelwood in Pittsburgh, and McKeesport twelve miles upriver from Pittsburgh. The new Hungarians, however, live far from these old neighborhoods and churches, dispersed in suburbs. The old Hungarians lived in real Hungarian-speech

communities, where their children could easily learn to speak Hungarian well. The strength of these Hungarian-speech communities is shown by the fact that, in some cases, immigrants could spend five or six decades within them without learning English. The new Hungarians don't live in real Hungarian-speech communities. If anything, they live in virtual Hungarian communities, in which people speak Hungarian to others only on phones, these days meaning smartphones, often via video links. Under such circumstances their children cannot possibly learn Hungarian, because there is nowhere to learn and no one to learn from. If the family is the only speech community within which to learn Hungarian in North America, the children's Hungarian language competence will be unavoidably inadequate. In my review I made the prediction that there *will* be Hungarians in the US in the twenty-first century, but almost none of their children will learn to speak Hungarian well.

My prediction can be regarded as a falsifiable hypothesis. Katalin Pintz's excellent study on New Brunswick, NJ. Hungarians in the first decade of the twenty-first century seems to offer a refutation: "More than a hundred years after the arrival of the first immigrant masses from Hungary in the USA, Hungarian culture still flourishes in the city of New Brunswick" (Pintz 2011: 113). However, "the constant arrival of new immigrants" (Pintz 2011: 112) in New Brunswick may well be the explanation for the flourishing Hungarian culture. Whether or not the American-born children of these new immigrants will learn to speak Hungarian well in New Brunswick in this day and age is an open question.

### **Two Invaluable Archives of Old-Timers' Hungarian Speech**

Finally, I would like to call readers' attention to two of the oldest archives of Hungarian American speech. Andrew Vázsonyi's<sup>5</sup> *Beyond Castle Garden: An American Hungarian Dictionary of the Calumet Region* (1995, reviewed in English by Moravcsik 1996, and Pugh 1996) is important in this context for two reasons. First, it is the first ever *élőnyelvi szótár* (living language dictionary) in Hungarian linguistics, meaning a dictionary with data from tape-recorded interviews. As I wrote in the book's introduction, "The examples are not invented sentences but instances of actual spoken language use" (Vázsonyi 1995: 20). Second, this was the first Hungarian dictionary based on a Standard Generalized Markup Language (SGML) database. The value of *Beyond Castle Garden* lies in it being the only dictionary of a now extinct variety of Hungarian: that spoken in the 1960s by old Hungarian immigrants who went to the United States in the first few decades of the twentieth century.

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<sup>5</sup> Andrew Vázsonyi (1906–1986) or *Vázsonyi Endre* in Hungarian, was born in Budapest in 1906. With his wife, ethnographer Linda Dégh, he immigrated to the USA in 1964 and held various academic jobs at Indiana University, Bloomington. In the mid-1960s he and his wife conducted extremely valuable research among the Hungarian Americans in the Calumet region south-east of Chicago.

The other invaluable archive is Elemér Bakó's<sup>6</sup> collection of dialect interviews collected from Hungarians in several locations across the United States in 1963. Luckily, these recordings have been digitized and are now freely available at the University of Debrecen's Department of Hungarian Linguistics' website, at: <https://mnytud.arts.unideb.hu/bako/index.php>.

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<sup>6</sup> Elemér Bakó (*Bakó Elemér* in Hungarian) was born in Hencida, Hungary, in 1915. He immigrated to the USA in 1951, and from 1952 to 1985 was a librarian at the Library of Congress. Originally a linguist, in 1963 he tape-recorded valuable dialectological interviews with several Hungarians across the United States. Bakó died in Silver Spring, Maryland, in 2000.