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The role of the Department of Finno-Ugrian Studies of the University of Vienna in the research of the Hungarian language communities in Austria

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The University of Vienna, founded in the 14th century, is the oldest university of the present-day German-speaking area. However, the teaching and research of Hungarian was institutionalized there only recently. From time to time, there had been teachers of the Hungarian language or researchers specializing, for instance, in the history of the Hungarian nation, but there was no Hungarian department. The Department of Finno-Ugrian Studies was finally created in the 1970’s, largely thanks to certain historical-comparative linguists who were interested in Finno-Ugric comparative language studies, and the first professor nominated to this new post was Károly Rédei, who already in those times was an internationally acknowledged expert of historical-comparative Finno-Ugristics, etymology and certain minor Finno-Ugric languages (such as Komi and the Ob-Ugric languages). Correspondingly, the linguistic profile of the department came to be determined by classical historical-comparative Finno-Ugric linguistics – that is, in the area of research.

As for the education, a great part of the practical work was needed for the teaching of the two greatest Finno-Ugrian languages, Hungarian and Finnish (Estonian lagged behind for various political and practical reasons). Already early on, Rédei had lecturers of Hungarian and Finnish for the language hours. For a long time, language teaching was regarded as “just language classes” (and not part of serious linguistic studies like the teaching of the Khanty language or the history of Hungarian, both of which belonged to Rédei’s core repertoire). Let me quote my colleague Timothy Riese, Rédei’s pupil and colleague who has followed and contributed to the development of our department since the 1970’s (and who is now working on a new grammar of Hungarian for academic language teaching); what he writes is, of course, characteristic of many contemporary Finno-Ugric departments in the time before the professionalization of the teaching of Hungarian or Finnish as foreign languages:

The teachers of Hungarian and Finnish at the various departments of Uralic/Finno-Ugrian Linguistics were earlier typically younger graduates of such departments in their home countries of Hungary and Finland. They spoke Hungarian or Finnish as their mother tongue, had a university degree (often in Finno-Ugrian Linguistics), but usually had no prior experience or training in the teaching of these languages to foreign students. It was also felt that such a teaching position was transitory at best, and should give the teacher the opportunity to work on his/her career as a linguist. A language teacher who, after a certain time, had not attained a higher scholarly degree and gone on to better things, e.g. a proper position in the university hierarchy, was considered a (scholarly) failure, all the more so if the teacher was a male, for whom the standards were of course “higher”.¹

¹ Riese, Timothy 2008: Teaching and Learning Small Uralic Languages: Why? How? – Péter Pomozi (ed.), *Navigare humanum est... Pusztay János hatvanadik születésnapjára*. Budapest: Finnugor Népek Világkongresszusa Magyar Nemzeti Szervezete. 176–181.

For a long time, the Hungarian lecturer was a visiting lecturer, meaning that her² work was supported and coordinated by the Balassi Institute in Hungary (or its predecessors) and had to be synchronized with the Hungarian institution in charge. Since 2007, however, the lecturer's post belongs to the University of Vienna, and this year, to our great joy, our present-day lecturer Márta Csire was tenured.

Beside language studies, the teaching and research of Hungarian literature and culture has developed intensively during more than thirty years. Alongside Professor Rédei, a guest professor's post for Hungarian literature was created already in the first years of the new department, and since then, two literature researchers of the department – Pál Deréky and Andrea Seidler – have acquired the qualification to an associate professor's post, which means that the department now has three professors for the teaching of Hungarian literature and culture.

The more than thirty years long history of the department is, thus, characterized by constant growth. In the first few years, the students (many of whom were of Hungarian descent) constituted a small, intimate group, while few of them managed to finish the *Diplomstudium* of those times. Now, in contrast, we have 40-50 beginners every year, and the department "produces" dozens of graduates every year – including the BA grades according to the new system. This new "Bolognese" system was introduced in 2003, together with the new BA programme of Finnish studies. (Earlier, the Department had fairly generous teaching resources for Finnish – a whole lecturer's post – at its disposal, but the status of the Finnish language in the study programme was rather marginal. Now, BA students choose either Finnish or Hungarian studies.)

These developments had very little to do with the Hungarian-speaking population of Austria, with one exception: from the early 1980's on, the Department also offers – in addition to the MA programmes in Finno-Ugric Linguistics or Hungarian (literature and culture) Studies, a Hungarian teachers' training programme (*Lehramt Ungarisch*), the only one of its kind outside the Hungarian-speaking area proper. The teaching in this programme mainly consists of the same lectures and seminars which are also offered to the students of Hungarian (BA/MA) or Finno-Ugric (MA) studies, but there are a few additional courses for didactics, now given by Edina Brenner. The teacher training programme, of course, serves the interests of the Hungarian-speaking communities in Austria, but whether and how it can contribute to the development of Hungarian teaching in Austria, is also a political question. For instance: Educating qualified Hungarian teachers is not enough, if the schools do not employ them, if the Hungarian-speaking parents are not conscious of their rights, if they do not require Hungarian teaching for their children...

The sad fact that the activities of the Department had very little to do with the Hungarian language in Austria has many natural reasons. Firstly: Hungarian Studies in Vienna are largely concentrated on the research of literature and culture, and here, the natural focus is on written literature. Of course, the Department's literature scholars realize that it is not meaningful for the Viennese department to concentrate on intra-Hungarian questions of Hungarian-language culture, considering that the Hungarian literature and culture, in fact, have always been multilingual and international. For this reason, they focus on multilingual and multicultural works and personalities, questions of multilingual and in-between identities in literature and culture, and, of course, on the translations of Hungarian literature and other contacts between the Hungarian-speaking and the German-speaking areas. This, in turn, does not directly concern the Hungarians of Austria. After World War I and the peace treaty of Trianon, the old Hungarian minority in Burgenland was hardly represented among Austrian intellectuals, and the Hungarian language lost its earlier prestige. Among the diverse

² Additional note to the English version: All Hungarian lecturers in Vienna so far have been women. This confirms the impression that the language lecturer's post was seen as a typical women's job (lower prestige, lower payment and more modest career expectations).

immigrant Hungarians there were, of course, educated people who were active in various fields of “high” culture, but as the Hungarian-speaking groups of Austria in general, they failed to create a strong Hungarian-language presence in Austrian cultural life. This means that the Hungarians in Austria – seen as representatives of “the” Hungarian community in Austria (which, in fact, does not exist) – had not much to offer to the research of “high” culture and literature.

In linguistics, on the other hand, there was for a long time a lack of decisive impulses and of practical opportunities. The Department of Finno-Ugrian Studies in Vienna is a typical representative of *Auslandsfinnougristik*: in charge of practically anything that is connected with any Uralic language or its speakers. While “national philologies” in their home countries (for instance, German departments in Austria or Hungarian departments in Hungary) can allow themselves a certain specialization, focus on certain detail questions or even on one certain theoretical framework, Finno-Ugrian Studies *extra muros* are practically obliged to deal with anything from Samoyed historical phonology to modern Hungarian verse. Besides, they are responsible for teaching two or three or even more exotic languages to students who mostly start their language studies from scratch, have never been confronted with a non-Indo-European language before – a language with more than 15 cases but no grammatical gender, a language about which an average Austrian only knows that “it’s impossible to learn”. To illustrate the situation: just think of a Department of Comparative Indo-European Studies which is responsible not only of Sanskrit and historical-comparative Indo-Europeanistics but also of Modern Portuguese literature and the teaching of practical Swedish and Icelandic. Actually, the teaching of modern languages needs resources also beyond the language classes; for instance, Károly Rédei could not only concentrate on his special fields of expertise but was also compelled to teach descriptive Hungarian grammar (as for “being compelled”, he himself confessed to me once that he never really learned to like this part of his job).

Károly Rédei, the founding father of Finno-Ugrian Studies in Vienna, was a Finno-Ugricist of the old school, and traditional old-school Finno-Ugrian studies were part of the old-world academia, an ideological framework in which university studies were elite activities as far as possible from the practical duties of everyday life. This means that my predecessor, however patriotic a Hungarian he was, however ardently he loved his mother tongue, was educated and socialized in a certain theoretical and social framework which made it impossible for him to see the research into the Hungarian language in Austria as his personal duty – it was not his field of specialization. He did not regard organizing sociolinguistic research as his personal responsibility, and I believe he considered it natural that for decades, Hungarian sociolinguists regularly came to Austria to research the state and use of the Hungarian language but hardly bothered to contact his department.

For myself, this situation was absurd, and let me now briefly explain why I have a different view on the duties of the Finno-Ugric Department. First of all: although I, like Károly Rédei, represent and identify myself with historical-comparative Finno-Ugrian linguistics, my background is still different. I was born and bred in an officially bilingual country, where the Swedish-speaking minority, for historical reasons, plays a disproportionately important role in the world of research, politics, administration and urban culture. The Swedish-speaking people in Finland do not constitute merely a “traditional” rural minority which can be isolated in its periphery to conserve its allegedly “original, authentic” culture in an idealized and imaginary monolingual world; they have an important part in modern, urban culture and cannot be “exoticized” or “musealized”, “othered away” (which, by the way, was the traditional policy with the Sámi minority). They live in a bilingual or multilingual world which needs to be researched, and it is impossible to imagine a Finnish university department of Nordic languages without any research into Finnish-Swedish bilingualism, language contacts, language policies and bilingual language use. For this reason, it was natural for me to expect that the Viennese department would initiate and organise

sociolinguistic or contact-linguistic research into Hungarian as spoken in Austria, and for nine years now it has made me concerned and a little ashamed that we have not been able to do very much in this direction. Now, we are finally planning to do something – but before coming to this, I will present another justification for the active role of our department in the research of Hungarian in Austria.

The situations and roles of minority languages in Europe are changing rapidly, largely due to globalisation, new forms of mobility, the development of language teaching and the education systems in general, the growing importance of media etc. Today's minorities do not live in idealized monolingual communities – the normal speaker of a European minority language today is bi- or multilingual. Not only is s/he confronted with the majority language from early childhood on, s/he will also learn one or more foreign languages at school or simply consume the English-language products of multinational entertainment industries. What is maybe even more important – with the exception of a few *grandes nations*, this applies to most majorities and speakers of national languages as well. It is more and more usual that a Hungarian-speaking Hungarian or a German-speaking Austrian will have to learn foreign languages or at least accept the confrontation with other languages. Globalisation also implies that there will be more and more people learning languages like Finnish, Hungarian, Estonian, Lithuanian, Ukrainian or Icelandic, out of pure interest or for practical reasons, even if nobody in the family speaks the language. This means that the speaker community of such a language will not be an exclusive club any more, a closed circle one has to be born into (unless, in some fortunate cases, you will be accepted by virtue of your marriage with an insider), but it may turn into a pluricentric whole with many different norms – I believe that many languages are now developing in the same direction as English which does not even exist as one language any more but as *World Englishes* in the plural. And if Hungarian is an international and pluricentric language, researching and planning Hungarian will not be the responsibility of the Hungarian state alone.

Although Hungary, as the nation-state of the majority of Hungarians, is the most important protector of the Hungarian language, it is not the only one. From an Austrian point of view: If the first question of language planning and language policies is always: *whose language?*, then the Hungarian language in Austria belongs to the Hungarians in Austria. The Hungarian speakers in Austria, in turn, are often Austrian (or Slovak, Serbian etc.) citizens, they live here and pay their taxes to the Republic of Austria. For Austria, the “outsourcing” of the teaching, research and planning of Hungarian to Hungary would be a dangerous mistake – it would mean a perilous short-sightedness in cultural history and language policy. It would mean a denial of the millennial presence of Hungarians in Austria, in Austrian culture and society, that is: a denial of part of Austria itself. This, in turn, is something a civilised European state cannot afford to, and for this reason it is imperative for Austria to have Austrian Hungarian Studies and Austrian Finno-Ugric Studies – of course, the smoother their cooperation with Hungarian colleagues and related institutions, the better, but by this, Austria will not avoid its responsibility. And this responsibility is “realised” in us, in the Department of Finno-Ugric Studies at the University of Vienna.

Let me once again return to the concept of *Auslandsfinnougristik*, a Finno-Ugric department which is not an extension or the historical background formation of the national philology as in Hungary or Finland (on the contrary: Hungarian or Finnish studies *extra muros* are often part of a Finno-Ugric department). That institutes of this kind are in charge of almost anything connected with the languages and cultures of a whole language family is, of course, a huge burden and obligation, but at the same time it means liberty and independence: we can regard the questions of our languages independently of the national philologies, their traditions, institutions and priorities. I will conclude with a concrete example of new perspectives for the research of Hungarian-speaking communities outside Hungary.

The research consortium ELDIA (European Language Diversity for All) is the result of a long planning process. It began with my colleague Anneli Sarhima at the University of Mainz looking for financing for PhD students and junior researchers working on (minor) Finnic languages, and only gradually, during planning meetings with more and more colleagues, it developed into a geographically and thematically larger research consortium to be financed from the EU 7th framework programme. By now, we are planning to be able to officially initiate the project in the beginning of March 2010, and two future project workers in Vienna have already started their work with a minor grant from the University of Vienna: Ilona Soukup, junior researcher, and Hajnalka Berényi Kiss, administrative assistant.

The main ideas of ELDIA are described in the project flyer and on the project website (<http://www.eldia-project.org/>). To sum up very briefly: the goal of ELDIA is the comparative research of European multilingual speaker communities and, on this basis, composing a measurement instrument – *European Language Vitality Barometer, EuLaViBar* – for the use of researchers, policy-makers and other stakeholders.

Now, I would just like to say a couple of words about the target languages in ELDIA. These cover a geographically wide area, from the Barents Sea almost to the Adriatic, and represent almost any possible type of minority languages: there are minor and major, autochthonous and migrant groups, officially used and established literary languages and only recently or hardly literarized languages, under a broad range of political circumstances. The languages examined happen to belong to the Finno-Ugric language family: they include expatriate varieties or (more or less) close relatives of Finnish and Estonian as well as two Hungarian groups outside Hungary – in Austria and Slovenia (the latter area project is led by Anna Kolláth). This is not a Finno-Ugric project in the strict sense of the word, that is, it does not deal with the relatedness or shared Finno-Ugric heritage of these languages. Yet, the genetic relatedness of these languages does play a role, and this can be seen from two points of view.

First: The Finno-Ugric languages, with a few exceptions, are fairly weakly represented in the internationally accessible research, and there are few if any internationally comparable or compatible studies available. In practice it seems to be that there are certain European minority languages which figure fairly often in international contexts. As we started to plan our EU project, many colleagues advised us to try to involve Gaelic or Breton communities, “because the Celts always get EU money” – and likewise, Basque, Catalan and Frisian belong to the actively investigated minority languages. Minority languages in Eastern Europe as well as non-Indo-European languages in general (except, perhaps, Basque) have received far less attention in international research of minorities and multilingualism, and already this speaks for a research project with a completely different focus.

Second: Finno-Ugric minorities have almost always been researched either individually or within the framework of Finno-Ugric studies or a national philology. Hungarian communities outside Hungary are usually investigated one by one or as parts of the Hungarian-language area of the Carpathian Basin. This is natural, as this research is often directed, organised and/or supported by Hungarian institutions, and for the state of Hungary, the importance of these activities is beyond doubt. However, I would also plead for a complementary viewpoint. It is important to demonstrate to the international community of sociolinguists, researchers of language policies, ethnopolitics etc. that the Hungarian-speaking groups in Austria exist and deserve to be researched, and that this research has to be connected with international projects and networks, not only as part of the Hungarian minority research but on its own right. This might also have political significance: if we can demonstrate that the research into a Hungarian-speaking minority group does not only serve the interests of the Hungarian nation(-state), that it is not just an internal affair of the Hungarians but may contribute to the comparative European minority research and to a better

understanding of European multilingualism, this might help soothe the political tensions around the Hungarian minorities in some other neighbouring countries of Hungary as well.

To conclude, I would like to return to the role of the Vienna Department and of Finno-Ugrian Studies *extra muros* in general. As a representative of Finno-Ugrian linguistics I am proud to state that this discipline with rich traditions still contributes to our understanding of language change and variation. On the traditional questions of Finno-Ugric comparative and historical linguistics, there is a continuous, interesting and theoretically ambitious discussion going on, and minor Finno-Ugric languages are actively researched – at our department, for instance, within two research projects, one national (FWF) and one international (ESF). At the same time, Finno-Ugrian research institutions are well aware of their new tasks. By initiatives such as the project ELDIA we would like to demonstrate that alongside the traditional (and still legitimate!) tasks, it is vital to fill the traditional institutional frameworks with new interpretations and new contents.