

When a “big” language meets “small” languages: a case study of English influence on Hungarian and Bulgarian

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1. On language contact manifestations

The question how “big” or ‘small’ a given language is seems to be quite relative – as we know, it is not the number of the native speakers that is the cardinal factor, other parameters could be even more influential, e.g. political and economical superiority. All this in mind, no-one doubts the ultimate dominance of the English language in our days, and certainly, geographically speaking, its active interaction with the European languages. The phrase “active interaction”, however, is somewhat misleading – it is the English language that influences the rest, as many linguistic studies reveal and describe.

Undoubtedly, the phenomenon of language contact, and the way it affects the structure of languages, has been of great interest to linguists in recent years. This may be contributed also to the fact that in the early 21st century we find linguistic “minorities” in virtually every country of the world. In modernity, having one mother tongue and residing in a country with another – different from the mother tongue – official language is more of a regularly encountered linguistic situation, rather than of a surprising one.

2. Aims and research hypothesis

The aim of the presented paper is to look at how grammatical forms and structures “react” when two languages come into contact, and to offer insight into the mechanisms that induce people to transfer grammatical structures from one language to another. More specifically, it examines the language output of Bulgarian and Hungarian mother tongue speakers in English language environments. The work aims at tracing the most recent realizations of such language contacts. English, as many would agree, is a dominant linguistic “invader” world-wide, thus presenting a finely developed and rich set of “intrusive” linguistic elements varying from phonological to lexical.

3. Morphophonological parameters

An example of such an “intrusion” manifested within the morphophonological domain is presented as follows. The examined language material reveals common strategies in the adaptation process of the most recent verbal borrowings (resulting from such a language contact). Both Bulgarian and Hungarian demonstrate the tendency for obligatory verbalization to be carried out by native suffixes, which seem to take the place of the active suffix containing a foreign (i.e. previously borrowed) element added to loanwords from (Western-)European languages. This in fact comes to show that there exist some “fashionable” waves in the use of certain verbalizing suffixes, which, however, are far from sporadic, since they are observed in more than one language (e.g. in two genealogically and typologically distant languages).

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