

The Unrecognized Linguistic Right in Hungarian Education (2012)

Miklós Kontra¹

There is by now a great deal of good literature on linguistic rights in education, including The Hague Recommendations (1996), many papers in Phillipson, ed. (2000), Skutnabb-Kangas (2000), Skutnabb-Kangas et al, eds. (2009), UNESCO (2003) etc. This literature usually focuses on the right to mother-tongue-medium education, or the right to bi- or multilingual education, and the all too frequent violations of these rights in most states on all continents. However, when it comes to the right to education through the medium of a nonstandard vernacular, such as African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in the USA, the amount of specialist literature concerning such issues is smaller (see, for instance, Labov 1982, Baugh 2000, Wolfram 1998). In the case of AAVE, we have a conflict between a ‘good’ variety (Standard English, regarded as worthy for use in education) and a ‘bad’ variety (AAVE, regarded as unworthy for educational purposes), and this conflict is accentuated by race: Standard English is associated with white speakers and AAVE with blacks.

In this paper I will discuss the conflict between a ‘good’ and a ‘bad’ variety of a language not associated with differences of race: the educational conflict between Standard Hungarian required in schools, job interviews and other socially important domains, and nonstandard Hungarian varieties, i.e. varieties of the language which are almost unanimously regarded as undesirable in schools. But first let us briefly look, not at varieties of Hungarian, but at some languages different from Hungarian.

Two conflicts concerning the right to mother-tongue-medium education in Hungary

According to Baugh (1999), educational malpractice refers to the miseducation of schoolchildren by trained teachers. In a similar fashion to the linguistic diversity of the United States, Hungary has (a) students for whom Standard Hungarian is native, abbreviated SHN, (b) those for whom Standard Hungarian is not native, SHNN, and (c) those for whom Hungarian is not native, HNN. The most conspicuous cases of educational malpractice in Hungary have concerned two groups of HNN students: the Gypsies whose mother tongue is Gypsy or Boyash (a dialect of Rumanian), and the Hungarian students who are medically deaf.

While most Gypsies/Roma in Hungary are native speakers of Hungarian, more than 48 000 of them claimed Gypsy or Boyash as their mother tongues in the last two censuses (2001 and 2011). Almost all of their children are educated through the medium of Hungarian only, and the state’s denial of their right to education in their mother tongue results in their dramatic over-representation among the unemployed. As sociologist Kemény (1996) demonstrated in a study of Gypsies in Hungary, there are huge differences in educational achievement between the Gypsy males for whom their mother tongue is Hungarian and those for whom it is not. Among the Gypsies with Hungarian as mother tongue 22.9% did not complete 8 years of school (which made them, in this respect, well integrated into mainstream Hungarian society in the mid-1990s), but among those with Rumanian as mother tongue 41.6%, and among those with Gypsy as mother tongue 48.2% did not complete 8 years of school. As is well known, educational achievement and employment are highly correlated, consequently the Hungarian state’s de facto denial of some Gypsy children’s right to even begin their educational career through the medium of their mother tongue results in their lifelong unemployment.

¹ Miklós Kontra is a sociolinguist and Professor of Linguistics in the Department of English Language Teacher Education and Applied Linguistics, University of Szeged, Hungary. His primary interests lie in variation in Hungarian, bilingualism, educational linguistics, and Linguistic Human Rights. Email: kontra@lit.u-szeged.hu

This kind of linguistic genocide in education (for the term see Skutnabb-Kangas 2000) is aided by the Hungarian Statistical Office which, in their census question on mother tongue, collapses *beás* ‘Boyash, a dialect of Rumanian’ and *romani* ‘Romany’ as *cigány* ‘Gypsy’, thus making invisible the true number of Boyash-speakers and Romany-speakers (see Kontra 2011).

Until recently, medically deaf Hungarian students, who can never learn to hear, were taught orally and in a subtractive way, that is, they were forbidden to use Hungarian Sign Language in schools. Such oralist teaching practice deprived the Deaf children of their right to develop a linguistic competence by age three, and it deprived the Deaf or hearing children born to Deaf parents of their right to a mother tongue, that is Hungarian Sign Language. This was a case of the rightholders’ misidentification due to a lack of sound medical diagnosis. What was deemed to be good for the majority of the minority (for the hard-of-hearing who may learn to hear) was presented as good for all of the minority by obfuscating the heterogeneity of the rightholders (Kontra et al 1999). From a legal point of view all this came to an end when, at the end of 2009, the Hungarian Parliament passed Law CXXV of 2009 on Hungarian Sign Language and its Use (*2009. évi CXXV. törvény*). The law has recognized Hungarian Sign Language as an independent and natural language, and it has also recognized the Deaf or hard-of-hearing children’s right to bilingual education, i.e. their right to use Hungarian Sign Language as one of the media of instruction in Deaf schools.

Linguicism and standard language ideology

The rest of this paper also deals with social and educational discrimination between groups of people in Hungary defined on the basis of language, or, to use Tove Skutnabb-Kangas’ term, it is also about linguicism. The original definition was conceived to deal with interlingual rather than intralingual discrimination:

Linguicism can be defined as ideologies and structures which are used to legitimate, effectuate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and non-material) between groups which are defined on the basis of language (on the basis of their mother tongues).

(Skutnabb-Kangas 1988: 13)

If we delete the second parenthetical phrase, the definition also covers intralingual discrimination, i.e. the language subordination (Lippi-Green 1997) or verbal hygiene (Cameron 1995) that speakers of standard English, standard Hungarian, or almost any standard variety in Europe impose on their nonstandard speaking compatriots.

For centuries, issues of national independence and the (‘proper’) use of Hungarian have been intimately tied together. In 1825 the Hungarian Academy of Arts and Sciences was founded with the primary aim of enriching and cultivating the Hungarian language. The propagators of language cultivation (*nyelvművelés* in Hungarian) have had various institutional means for influencing language use, including the Academy. Hungarians live in what James Milroy (1999: 18) has called a ‘standard language culture’ in which ‘the awareness of a superordinate standard variety is kept alive in the public mind by various channels (including the writing system and education in literacy) that tend to inculcate and maintain this knowledge – not always in a very clear or accurate form – in speakers’ minds.’

The linguistic profession in Hungary is split between prescriptivists, who are held in high esteem by almost everybody, including the highest-ranking academicians of the country, and descriptivists, who are sometimes regarded as traitors to the nation. Hungarian language cultivators or language mavens are a politically and socially powerful lobby, with extreme influence in the media and in public education. However, recently there have been a few unequivocal signs of doubt concerning their usefulness to the nation. Language cultivators have been criticized for disseminating language myths and maintaining and recreating language-based discrimination among Hungarians.

Standard language ideology is extremely strong in Hungary. A representative survey we conducted in 1988 revealed that 33% of the adult population of the country watched language cultivation programs on TV frequently and 41% watched them occasionally. Nevertheless, linguistic insecurity is rampant: close to half of the adult population think that correct speech is important for success in life, but they do not exactly know what is and what is not correct (see Kontra, ed, 2003).

Most Hungarian school teachers teach their subjects, be they biology, mother tongue or anything else, in a way that might cause psychological damage to pupils. When pupils use a linguistic variant that is not part of Codified Standard Hungarian, teachers will often correct them by saying ‘That’s not Hungarian’, ‘Hungarians don’t speak that way’, or ‘True Hungarians don’t say such things’. Such verbal humiliation often causes long-lasting psychological injuries in pupils because they translate the teachers’ abuse as excluding their close relatives from ‘true Hungarians’, for the simple reason that they learned the ‘incorrect’, ‘non-Hungarian’ forms from their mothers, fathers, siblings, grandparents, etc. The moral evaluation of such behavior was expressed in unequivocal terms by Halliday et al (1964: 105) nearly half a century ago:

A speaker who is made ashamed of his own language habits suffers a basic injury as a human being: to make anyone, especially a child, feel so ashamed is as indefensible as to make him feel ashamed of the colour of his skin.

Such indefensible practice in Hungarian schools was demonstrated and duly criticized by the Hungarian linguist Papp (1935) three decades before Halliday et al.

The importance of language cultivation (*nyelvművelés*), ‘correct’ Hungarian, ‘beautiful’ speech, ‘logical’ writing etc is also emphasized in pedagogical documents, including the latest National Curriculum issued this year (*A Kormány 110/2012 (VI.4.) Korm. rendeleete*). This document pays lip service to a sociolinguistic attitude to language use (the need to analyze Hungarian in terms of its various users and uses), but it oftentimes calls attention to the requirement to speak Hungarian in a linguistically proper way, to use Hungarian grammar according to the norm, and to follow the rules of correct Hungarian.

Standard Hungarian ideology and its targets

Standard language ideology in Hungary is hegemonic, in the sense in which Wiley (1996: 113) defines it:

Linguistic hegemony is achieved when dominant groups create a consensus by convincing others to accept their language norms and usage as standard or paradigmatic. Hegemony is ensured when they can convince those who fail to meet those standards to view their failure as being the result of the inadequacy of their own language [...]. Schools have been the principal instruments in promoting a consensus regarding the alleged superiority of standardized languages.

What I will do now is to look closely at the ‘others’ who accept ‘the norms’, and the norms themselves, one by one. At first glance, Wiley’s description of linguistic hegemony seems to fit all Hungarians in Hungary. In reality, however, we see a lot of interesting variation. In a review, Miller (1999: 121) cogently states that ‘Tame standard codes can be laid down, but taming millions of exuberant users is quite a different task.’ The Hungarian National Sociolinguistic Survey, conducted in 1988, offers a dramatic demonstration of the differences between Codified Standard Hungarian and the grammaticality judgments² and oral sentence-completions of a representative sample of native speakers (N=832) across Hungary.³

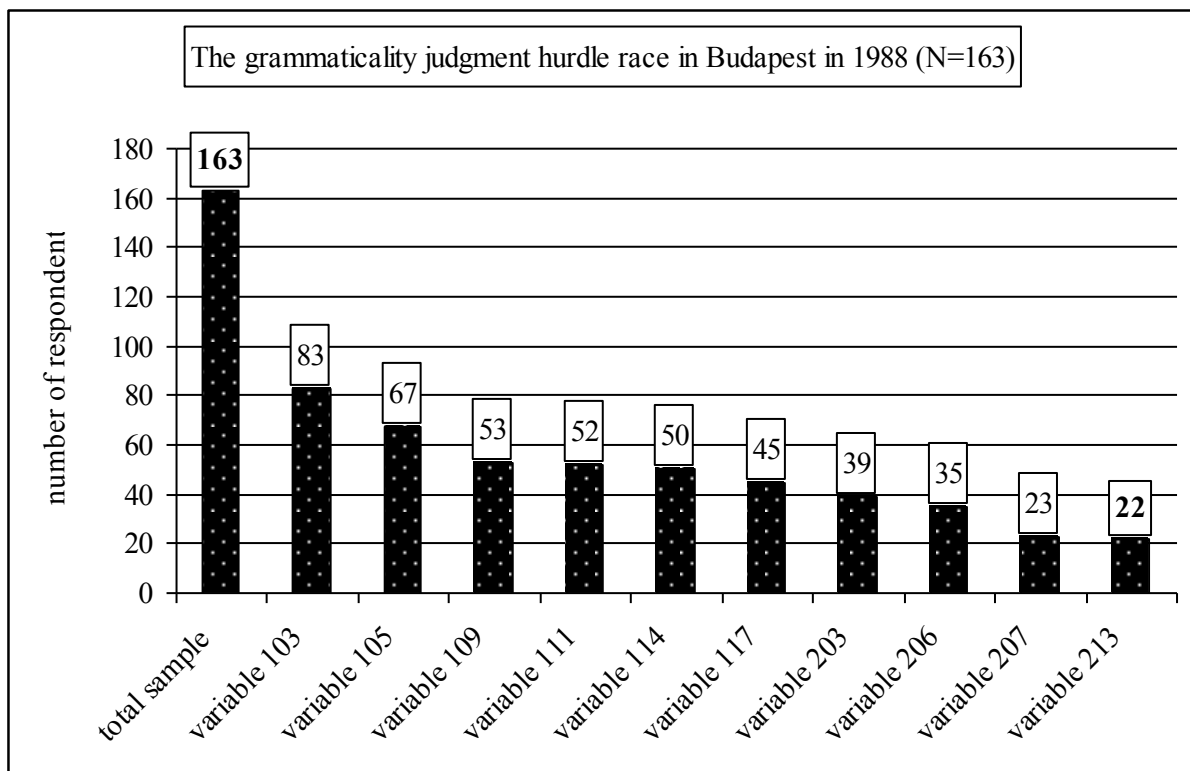
² In the grammaticality judgment tasks, following a trial phase, respondents had to judge whether each sentence given to them on index cards was ‘grammatically correct’.

³ The Survey is described in detail in Kontra (2006), see also Cseresnyési (2005).

The question to be asked is the following: What percentage of the entire adult population of Hungary is ‘targeted’ by language cultivators and school teachers if, by definition, those who speak the codified standard variety are not targeted? (This question also implies the question What percentage of school children are ‘targeted’ by school teachers in Hungary?) To answer this, I set up a ‘Hungarian linguistic hurdle race’, in which each hurdle was a linguistic variable (a task with a standard or a nonstandard solution), and respondents who opted for a nonstandard solution (variant) were eliminated from the race. Omitting the linguistic details (which are published in Kontra 2006), let me state that by the time the respondents got as far as the 10th hurdle (grammaticality judgment task), only 64 of the full sample of 832 were left. In other words, this shows that Hungarian language cultivators and school teachers promulgate a set of rules that only 8% of the population adheres to, even when they are on their best linguistic behavior, as they are when answering questions on linguistic correctness posed by a social scientist. In other words, the correctness judgments of 92% of the adult population of Hungary differ from those prescribed by the school teachers and language cultivators!

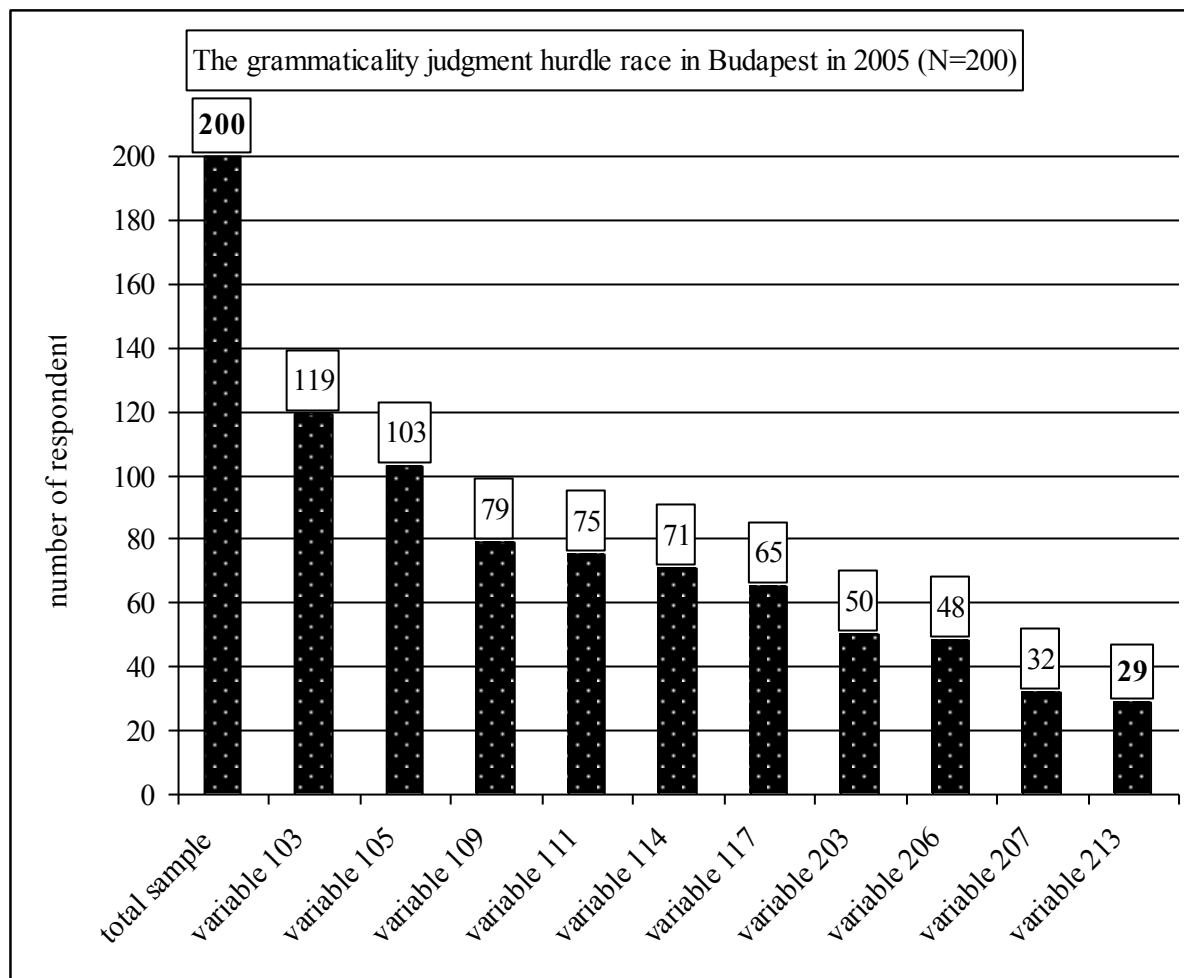
A real-time replica study in Budapest of the 1988 country-wide survey shows that these judgments of grammatical correctness have not changed at all between 1988 and 2005. Figure 1 shows the grammaticality judgment hurdle race in Budapest in 1988. As can be seen, out of the random representative sample of 163 respondents only 22 (13.5%) made 10 judgments according to the rules of Codified Standard Hungarian.

Figure 1: Respondents who judged 1, 2, 3, ..., 10 sentences in accordance with Codified Standard Hungarian in Budapest in 1988



Seventeen years later the very same survey was administered to respondents in Budapest. The results show no change at all: now 14.5% of the representative sample made 10 judgments according to the rules of Codified Standard Hungarian, see Figure 2.

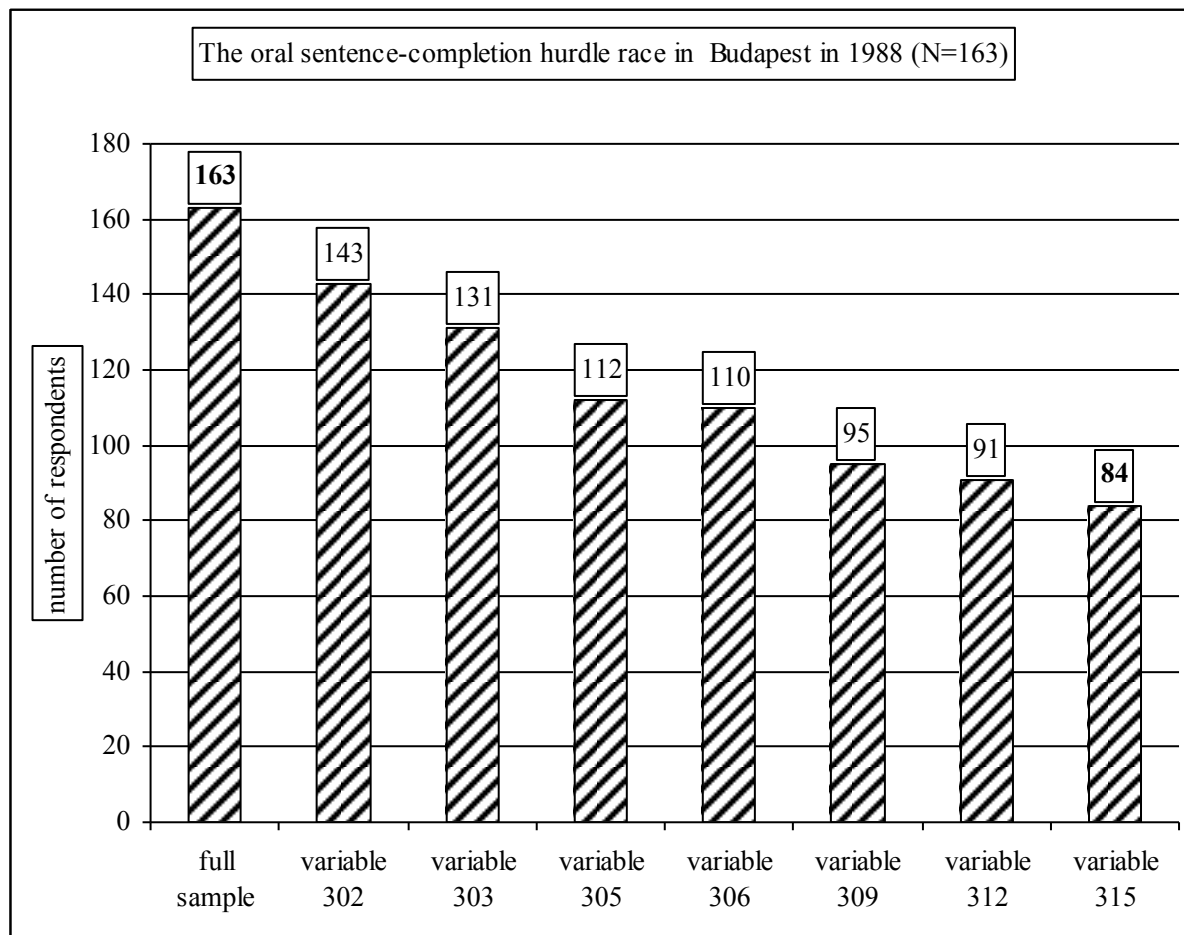
Figure 2: Respondents who judged 1, 2, 3, ..., 10 sentences in accordance with Codified Standard Hungarian in Budapest in 2005



If we use the same linguistic hurdle race for oral sentence-completion data,⁴ we see a similar picture, but the loss of respondents is on a smaller scale. Figure 3 shows that in 1988 only 51.5% (or 84 out of 163) of the Budapest respondents could orally complete 7 sentences according to the rules of Codified Standard Hungarian.

⁴ In the oral sentence-completion tasks respondents had to insert the appropriate form of a word (whose citation form was printed in the margin of the index card) into a blank in a sentence, and say the entire sentence out loud.

Figure 3: Respondents who orally completed 1, 2, ..., 7 sentences in accordance with Codified Standard Hungarian in Budapest in 1988



The results of the replica study 17 years later are not any different: now 108 out of a total of 200 respondents (or 54%) could orally complete the 7 test sentences according to the rules of Codified Standard Hungarian. Consequently, we can say that Hungarian school teachers and language cultivators ‘target’ the speech-ways of about half the adult population of the capital city of Budapest. If we look back to the 1988 country-wide data, the speech-ways of two-thirds of Hungary’s adult population were targeted (Kontra 2006: 107).

As can be seen, the grammaticality judgments show the samples to be much less standard than the oral sentence-completion tasks. There are sound psycholinguistic reasons for this, but nevertheless, the fact remains that advocates of Codified Standard Hungarian (including almost all school teachers in Hungary) have many millions of unruly Hungarians to tame.

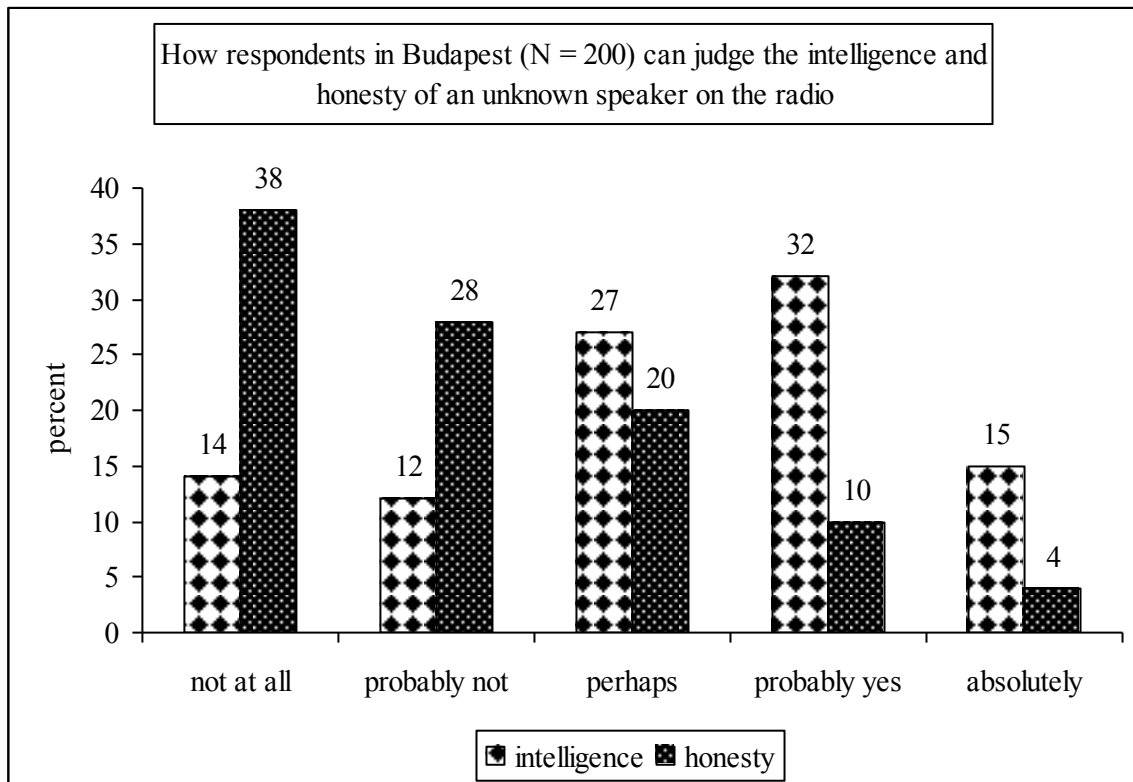
Why is this a very serious problem?

Many people believe, not just Hungarians but Germans, Swedes, Russians and others, that speakers of a nonstandard variety should only blame themselves. If they were not that lazy, they would have easily learned to speak Hungarian, German etc correctly. Most school teachers, who should know better since they are professionals, tend to agree. In our European societies language myths and prejudices are omnipresent. The strength of Hungarian prejudices can be illustrated by the responses to two questions in our 2005 study in Budapest. Among other questions we asked:

- (1) When you turn on the radio and hear an unknown person speak for about two minutes, can you judge how smart or intelligent the person is?
- (2) When you turn on the radio and hear an unknown person speak for about two minutes, can you judge how trustworthy or honest the person is?

Figure 4 shows the social distribution of (smart) and (honest), which can be summarized this way: Almost half the inhabitants of Budapest can judge the smartness/intelligence of an unknown speaker on the radio, but they cannot judge the person's honesty/trustworthiness.

Figure 4: The social distribution of linguistic prejudice (smart) and (honest) in Budapest in 2005



Furthermore, chi-square tests have shown that the social distribution of linguistic prejudice in Budapest is independent of speakers' educational levels, sex and age because the myth 'Dumb people speak dumb language' permeates practically all people in Hungary. If such prejudice were not enough, it can be aggravated by the effects of linguistic hegemony I quoted from Wiley (1996) above: those who suffer linguistic discrimination are often convinced that their failure is the result of the inadequacy of their own language.

From all the discussion so far, it may seem that linguistic prescriptivism is responsible for such harmful educational effects. Not necessarily so. In a highly illuminative study Myhill (2004) has shown that prescriptive correctness is socially harmful only if it goes hand in hand with prestige-based correctness. This latter type of correctness derives from the language use of a society's social elite. When prescriptive language gurus propagate forms which are natively used by members of the social elite, correctness becomes related to social class. Most European societies are like this, but in a number of languages the 'standard' or 'correct' variety is not based on the everyday language of the social elite (examples include Hebrew, Arabic, Icelandic, or Sinhala). As Myhill points out, Hebrew and English prescriptivism are equally unscientific, 'but only English prescriptivism can also be considered to be discriminatory because only English prescriptivism is based upon following the usage of the highest-status speakers' (Myhill 2004: 398).

Hungarian is also like English. In our 1988 study the upper-level managers and university-trained professionals used or judged correct nonstandard forms in significantly smaller proportions than did the unskilled workers (see Kontra 2006: 119).

Many also believe that speakers of nonstandard varieties could easily learn to speak correctly but they are too lazy. However, sociolinguists have demonstrated in several languages, Hungarian and English included, that there are linguistic features which are easy to learn but others may be impossible to learn (see Kontra 2006: 108–112). This ‘too lazy to learn correct language’ argument is simply false. In many cases it is linguistic nonsense and educational malpractice.

Linguicism is different from racism, sexism and other forms of social discrimination in as much as, in many cases, those who maintain language-based social discrimination are hailed for doing so. They are regarded as the guardians of good language, correct usage, and, by implication, the well-being of the nation that speaks the language. Racists are not generally hailed for being racists, but linguicists fare much better. This situation is made worse by those who suffer the discrimination in as much as they may blame themselves as a result of linguistic hegemony.

Such discrimination constitutes a serious obstacle in educational achievement (pupils with low achievement results on mother-tongue tests may never get to schools where they would be successful, were it not for the rampant linguistic discrimination). Schools should dismantle, rather than erect and maintain such linguistic barriers to educational success. After all, to conclude by quoting the distinguished British linguist Peter Trudgill: ‘If women are being discriminated against, you don’t say “You should become a man”’.⁵

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