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LANGUAGE BARRIER FACED BY HUNGARIAN WOMEN STUDENTS AND TEACHING STAFF IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN SERBIA

Циљ овог рада је да се анализирају ефекти језичке баријере са којом се суочавају мађарске жене у систему високог образовања Србије. Анализа се заснива на двадесет четири полуструктурирана интервјуа који су обављени са студенткињама и наставним особљем мађарског порекла који студирају или раде на Универзитету у Новом Саду. Биће показано да се већина мађарских жена суочава са језичком баријером на почетку студирања, углавном због ограниченог познавања већинског језика (тј. српског). Оне троше велику количину времена и енергије на учење српског језика уместо на спремање испита, што утиче на њихов успех. Биће показано да релевантност савршене употребе већинског језика варира у различитим научним областима. У раду се предлажу мере које би могле да омогуће мађарским студентима да лакше превазиђу језичку баријеру.

Кључне речи: језичка баријера, мађарске жене, студенти, наставно особље.

1. Introduction

Vojvodina is the Northern province of Serbia, located between the rivers Danube and Sava from the South and West, and Hungary and Romania to the North and East. Vojvodina is inhabited by a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural community. The presence of various ethnic groups can be explained by two great migrations. The first occurred in the XVIII century when Serbs, Hungarians, Germans and many other ethnic groups migrated to the region under the reign of Maria Theresa (1740-1780). The second migration occurred after World War II, when the fleeing German population was replaced by people arriving from Bosnia and Herzegovina, and

from Montenegro. As a result of these migrations, today the largest ethnic group besides the Serbian-speaking majority is the Hungarian with 13% of the population, or 251,136 individuals (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2012).

The city of Novi Sad is the political and economic center of Vojvodina. The most important higher education institution of the region is the University of Novi Sad (UNS) with 50,000 students and 5,000 staff members, being one of the largest such organizations in this part of Europe. Although Hungarians constitute about 13% of Vojvodina's population, the number of Hungarian students studying at the UNS is only 6.7% (Lendák-Kabók, 2014). The rest study abroad, mostly in Hungary. This trend poses a significant challenge to both the Hungarian community and Serbia as well, as thousands of young people leave the country and usually do not return, causing both social and economic loss (via lost productivity).

Some argue that Hungarians leave because of historic causes, as the inhabitants of the mostly Hungarian inhabited settlements on the Tisza river were historically drawn to Szeged in Hungary, which has a respected university awarding degrees recognized in the EU. This paper will argue, that beside the above listed reason for the brain-drain, the language barrier faced by Hungarian students when entering the UNS is also a significant facet of this problem. By language barrier we are referring to the issues faced by Hungarian students who do not have an appropriate level of Serbian language proficiency when starting their studies at the UNS, where the overwhelming majority of courses are taught in Serbian.

The language barrier will be analyzed based on 24 semi-structured interviews conducted with Hungarian female professors, researchers and students. The focus will be on women, as it will be shown that they fare even worse than their male counterparts. The interviews will help identify the language-related issues and propose a set of measures, which might alleviate them.

2. Related works

The language rights and language use of minority ethnic groups have been analyzed in various parts of the World.

Although the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa established eleven languages as official in 1996, the government enforces a language policy of Anglicization. Afrikaans single-medium schools, where students learn in Afrikaans are targeted to become either double- or parallel-medium schools (Afrikaans and English)(Lubbe, 2015).

In Turkey, despite the progress made concerning the use of local languages since the 2000s, language rights per se still remain officially “non-existent”. Turkey’s former stance (prior to the 2000s) of active repression of language rights has now been replaced by passive denial (Öney, 2015).

Hungarians living in Serbia have legal rights which grant them use of their mother tongue in both education and administration. Being a member of the Hungarian ethnic group is often considered as an inherited burden (Göncz according to Hódi, 2004).

As far as higher education is concerned, the falling numbers of Hungarians in Vojvodina might partially explain why the number of Hungarian students has also continued to decrease compared to the total number of students at the UNS (Gábrity-Molnár, 2009). It is also important to note that 30% of the potential students from the Hungarian national community continue their higher education in Hungary (Takács, 2013). Hungarian students often complain that courses are taught in Serbian only, while they would like to obtain high quality education in their mother tongue (Takács, 2013). Students from the Hungarian national community mostly opt for social sciences and humanities, (Gábrity-Molnár, 2009). Hungarian women are significantly under-represented in technical sciences (Lendák-Kabók, 2014).

Teaching all classes in primary and secondary school in the minority language, with only a couple of hours a week of Serbian as the majority language, has created a number of generations of imbalanced bilingual speakers characterized by very low levels of competence in Serbian. In consequence they are incapable of continuing their education at university level in Serbia, and/or finding satisfying jobs which by default require knowledge of Serbian (Filipović et al., 2007). As a consequence, when Hungarian students enter the higher education system of Serbia, they first have to overcome the language barrier, i.e. learn Serbian, which is a significant disadvantage and requires a lot of time, effort and sacrifice (Lendák-

Kabók, 2014). All these have a negative impact on the results achieved, as most Hungarian students learn Serbian instead of studying the subjects taught (Lendák-Kabók, 2015).

This paper extends the current state-of-the-art by analyzing the status and language-related difficulties faced by those Hungarian women who remain in Serbia and study at the UNS.

3. Methodology

The qualitative research was based on semi-structured interviews, which are a particularly good way to study women and other marginalized groups (Esterberg, 2001). The interviews were voice recorded and transcribed, after which they were sent back to the respondents for authorization. Code names were used afterwards for the respondents in order to hide their identities, e.g. HFS = Hungarian Female Student, HFP = Hungarian Female Professor. Snowball sampling was used when making a decision whom to interview, both for the students and for the teaching staff (Esterberg, 2001).

Narrative analysis (Lawler 2004) was applied to analyze those parts of the interviews in which the respondents talked about their language related experiences in childhood, early studies and even today. Discourse analysis (van Dijk, 2014) was applied to understand the narratives and to position them taking various political situations into account, e.g. the Yugoslav civil war in the 1990s changed the political discourse and therefore society at large. Discourse analysis was also important to understand the women, whose schooling and career had a different path during the era of communism in Yugoslavia.

Coding methods suggested by Saldana (Saldana, 2013) and Esterberg were followed (Esterberg, 2001) when analyzing the qualitative data collected via the semi-structured interviews. The open coding method was used to identify themes connected to language. The themes identified in the coding phase were graded with magnitude codes. Serbian language proficiency was described with magnitude codes high, medium and low. 'High' meant fluency, 'medium' meant limited proficiency and 'low' was used for interviewees who spoke very little Serbian in various periods

of their lives. The language barrier faced when starting their studies was graded with magnitude codes: strong, moderate and none. 'Strong' stands for a very intense language barrier, which caused many problems. A 'moderate' barrier caused limited problems.

The findings about Hungarian female teaching staff and students will be presented separately. The teaching staff will be presented first, because of the temporal line, i.e. their experiences happened earlier. The different experiences of women studying in Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics (STEM) and Social Sciences & Humanities (SSH) will be specifically highlighted.

4. Professors

Thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with the Hungarian female teaching staff who will be referred to in the text via code names HFP1-HFP13 (HFP = Hungarian female professor). The interviewees were selected by the snowball sampling method. The interviews were recorded during late 2014 and early 2015, in an interval of approximately six months. They were transcribed and sent back to the interviewees for authorization.

Six interviewees worked in STEM and seven in SSH fields. The Serbian language proficiency and language barrier faced when starting their studies was magnitude coded.

4.1 Language barrier

The interviewees were born between 1952 and 1983 and raised in different parts of Vojvodina, namely Novi Sad, Subotica, Kula, Senta, Bezdán and Zrenjanin, which affected their Serbian language skills. Most finished their pre-university education in Hungarian and then enrolled at the university in Serbian language. It is important to note that four professors studied in their mother tongue, as three studied Hungarian language and literature in Serbia (an SSH field) and one professor obtained her bachelor's degree in a STEM field in Hungary.

Table 1 contains the summarized findings based on the analyses of the coded interview transcripts. The table is structured in three main parts:

the professor code is in the first column, the second part contains the aspects of their childhood affecting their Serbian language proficiency and the third part summarizes their language related experiences at the start of their studies. The three levels of Serbian language proficiency used were: H = high, M = medium and L = low. The three levels of language barrier used were: S = strong, M = moderate and a dash was used for the professors who did not face a noticeable language barrier.

Table SEQ Table * ARABIC 1 Language barrier root causes (professors)

Based on the data in the childhood section of Table 1, we conclude that professors who knew the majority language very well (1) were educated in Serbian, (2) grew up in an environment with a Serbian majority or (3) came from mixed marriages.

Professors who came from municipalities or city blocks with a strong Hungarian majority usually had medium (HFP4, HFP6) or low (HFP7, HFP8, HFP11) Serbian language proficiency. The only outlier was HFP2, who although she came from a Hungarian environment, knew Serbian very well as she learnt it at home. HFP4 and HFP6 knew Serbian at a medium level. HFP6 told us that after switching to a Serbian class in high school, she had difficulties reading what was written on the blackboard. This is supported by the following quote:

The beginning was really “hard”, after ten years spent in an all Hungarian environment and attending school in Hungarian, I could not read out loud simple things in Serbian at the blackboard, e.g. three plus two, four minus three in Serbian (HFP6).

Two interviewees faced a strong language barrier at the beginning of their studies (HFP8, HFP11), which is clearly related to their low Serbian language proficiency, which is further linked to their childhood background, namely they grew up in environments where they almost exclusively used the Hungarian (i.e. minority) language. HFP7's low Serbian level did not cause her any issues, as she studied in Hungarian.

The moderate language barriers are a mixed bag, i.e. the stories significantly differ. HFP4 started her studies in Serbian with a medium Serbian language proficiency, therefore having (only) moderate language difficulties. HFP5 and HFP10 faced an ‘inverse’ problem as they completed their childhood education in Serbian and then started their studies in Hungarian. HFP5 studied Hungarian language and literature in Serbia and was always anxious at the beginning of her studies, i.e. she was not sure whether her Hungarian language skills were sufficient. HFP10 went to Hungary to study in a STEM field and had to adjust back from Serbian to her mother tongue, which caused her moderate problems, she was slower in solving exercises in mathematics and physics, as she had lost the automatism which worked for her when solving those kinds of exercises in Serbian. Regardless of that she obtained a PhD and a teaching position at the University of Belgrade, where she had to adjust again, i.e. switch back to Serbian.

4.2 Bilingualism is an advantage

The Hungarian female professors and researchers unanimously stated that being bilingual is a significant advantage for them, as they can read, write and publish in both Serbian and Hungarian. Almost all maintain good relationships with colleagues in Hungary. Some of them have done research or written their dissertation in Hungary. A few of them have projects, or established collaborations with various higher education institutions in Hungary. HFP8 said:

I defended my thesis in Serbia, after doing my research in Budapest (Hungary). I wrote (my thesis) in Serbian. This was the advantage of the Hungarian language, I could do a very topical experiment in Hungary and discuss the problem with my Hungarian colleagues. The findings of my research conducted in Hungary I was able to publish in significant scientific journals (HFP8).

Nine of the professors were very competent in their mother tongue when it comes to professional use of Hungarian, i.e. the minority language. Three of them had a medium knowledge (HFP1, HFP6 and HFP8), and only one (HFP9) had low language competency, i.e. her mother tongue ‘changed’ to Serbian during the course of her career.

5. Students

Eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted with Hungarian female students. The interviewees were selected through personal connections and with the snowball sampling method. The interviews were tape-recorded in late 2014 and early 2015, transcribed and sent back to the interviewees for authorization. The interviewees were codenamed HFS1-HFS11 (HFS = Hungarian Female Student).

Seven students studied in STEM fields and four in SSH.

5.1 *Language barrier*

The students were born between 1986 and 1995, and raised in different parts of Vojvodina, namely: Novi Sad, Subotica, Bačka Topola, Ada, Srbobran, Pančevo. Almost all finished their elementary and high school education in their mother tongue, i.e. Hungarian.

Table 2 contains the summarized results of the analysis of the transcribed interviews. The same aspects were analyzed as for the professors, i.e. Serbian language proficiency and its relation to the language barrier faced by the students at the start of their studies.

Table SEQ Table * ARABIC 2 Language barrier root causes (students)

The majority of interviewees said that the ethnic composition of the settlement where they had been raised had a huge impact on their knowledge of the majority language. The ones who grew up in a Serbian-speaking environment knew Serbian at a high level. HFS5 was an exception to this rule as she relocated to a Hungarian environment. The majority of those who came from Hungarian speaking environments knew Serbian at a low or maybe medium level. None of the students came from mixed marriages and only one of them completed her schools in Serbian, while all started their studies in the majority's language.

The students who knew the language at a low level (HFS4, HFS7, HFS9, HFS11) were born in Subotica, Bačka Topola, Ada and Srbobran. This comes as no surprise, as Subotica, Bačka Topola and Ada are home to a sizeable Hungarian community, and in Srbobran HFS11 grew up in a street where everybody spoke Hungarian.

All eleven interviewees studied in Serbian. Five women explicitly identify the language barrier as the most important obstacle they had to overcome when entering the Serbian higher education system. This comes as no surprise considering that four of them had low Serbian language proficiency at the moment of university enrollment. They still feel a discomfort during examinations or when speaking in public. The language barrier became a constant fear for some of the women, hence they could not perform in exams adequately, affecting their self-confidence. To outsiders ignorant to their background they might seem as if they did not study for the exam. The following quotes supports this:

During the oral examination I constantly feel like I am at a disadvantage because of the language...Simply, I feel confused, I have little courage to speak, as I am not sure whether I speak correctly or not. It is also a problem that I speak in short sentences, so I could be more correct... During oral examinations people should be more philosophical, I cannot say the same thing in five different ways (HFS7).

I do not like to approach professors, I prefer not to talk. I usually don't ask questions either. For example, I wanted to ask the teaching assistant whether there were negative points, but I stuttered and felt very bad. The teaching assistant helped, he explained but made a strange face when he saw me struggling with Serbian (HFS11).

Even though HFS10 knew the majority language at a medium level in childhood, SSH studies required a higher level of language competency in order to follow the curriculum and to succeed in exams.

The ones who faced a moderate language barrier, had to “adjust their brains” to studying and passing exams in Serbian. Although HFS6 and HFS8 grew up in a Novi Sad, in a Serbian-speaking environment, they state that they were never before in a position to study and to reproduce curricula in Serbian. This was a barrier for just a short time for them, after a few months they managed to adjust.

HFS2 and HFS3 stated explicitly that they did not face a noticeable language barrier at all. Although HFS2 said that her parents would not have minded even if she had had to repeat a year at the university, as after all she was not studying in her mother tongue. This leads us to the conclusion, that even though they think that they had no difficulties at all, switching from a Hungarian high school to studying in Serbian at the university is a difficulty *per se*.

Four respondents, all from STEM fields, had positive language-related experiences (HFS1, HFS3, HFS6, HFS11), e.g. supportive teachers, colleagues who understood if they did not know something in Serbian or pronounced something incorrectly, or wanted to learn Hungarian from them.

HFS4 and HFS11 from STEM studies said that they had negative experiences, e.g. HFS4 said that the professor asked her whether she went to school in Hungarian, when she answered positively she got a low grade. HFS11 had significant language difficulties and wanted to write a request to be examined in written form.

HFS7, HFS8 and HFS10 from SSH (3 out of 4) said that they had very distinct negative experiences, e.g. publicly criticized by professors because of limited Serbian language proficiency or a feeling of being in a less favorable position compared to colleagues. HFS7 was criticized because of her imperfect language skills during an exam and told that she should learn Serbian by reading Dostoevsky:

... then he said, that this is the second year and I should learn the language of the country. Then he asked me, whether my parents learnt the Serbian language, when they came here?... Then I went to consult with the professor; asked him for an advice, how should I learn the language? He told me to read Dostoevsky in Serbian. This was his solution (HFS7).

Based on the above findings, we conclude that studying SSH is more difficult for students with limited Serbian proficiency. On the other hand, although three STEM students also had bad experiences, they were mostly satisfied with the atmosphere at their faculty. This might be attributed to the fact that STEM studies do not require perfect language skills, i.e. the formulas and numbers are universal and independent of language.

6. Discussion and suggestions for actions

Based on the above presented analysis of the interviews with professors and students we conclude that although most of the professors finished their studies in a different era, all of them faced a language barrier when they entered the Serbian higher education system. While this barrier is almost unnoticeable for those who are fluent in Serbian, it is quite significant to those who have lower Serbian language proficiency. The professors grew up in a different social setting, namely the forced ‘fraternity and equality’ of the communist Yugoslavia, which (among other outcomes) resulted in lower national segregation and better knowledge of the Serbian language, compared to the students’ who were finishing their education in the 1990s and 2000s.

The language barrier was the strongest in SSH studies (e.g. law, philosophy), where the language is the primary tool with which the professors and students operate. The language barrier is less prominent in STEM studies, where the students and professors often communicate via formulae and written examinations.

Knowing that almost all Hungarian students face a language barrier, and that the ones coming from Hungarian-speaking environments and enrolling in SSH studies fare the worst, we propose the following three measures: (1) improved Serbian language courses, (2) steering women towards STEM studies and (3) founding a dual-language university in Vojvodina.

Although it is compulsory for Hungarian pupils to learn Serbian, the efficiency of Serbian language courses might be improved by teaching more classes per week or adapting the curricula, e.g. Hungarian pupils in settlements with a Serbian majority could be offered a higher level Serbian course, while in settlements with a Hungarian majority they should start from the basics and with more per week.

It was shown that the language barrier is less prominent in STEM studies than in SSH. Additionally, a STEM degree might open up more employment options and getting a job is less likely to depend on perfect knowledge of Serbian. Because of this, it would be beneficial to steer Hungarian women towards pursuing careers in STEM. In essence, choosing STEM would be good for all women in Serbia, regardless of their ethnic group membership.

Founding a bi-lingual (Serbian and Hungarian) university would allow Hungarian students not to struggle with the language barrier and to focus on their studies exclusively. Learning in both languages would be beneficial for them, as they could perform better on the labor market, which requires in most cases a perfect knowledge of the majority language.

7. Conclusion

The goal of this paper was to analyze the language barrier faced by Hungarian women students and academic staff in the higher education system of Serbia. The research was based on 24 interviews conducted with Hungarian women students and professors. It was shown that the majority struggle at the start of their studies, because of the language barrier caused by studying in Serbian. We argued that Hungarian women face fewer language barrier related problems when studying in STEM fields, compared to studying in SSH fields, as the curriculum does not depend so much on language proficiency as in SSH fields, where language is the main tool used to convey the curricula and examine students. Hungarian women are less likely to choose a STEM field of study, than SSH. This is disadvantageous for them, as they would face fewer language related problems in STEM compared to SSH.

The paper proposes three measures which could help the Hungarian national community when it comes to the identified language barrier: (1) specialized and tailored Serbian language courses preparing Hungarian pupils for entering the higher education system; (2) steering Hungarian women towards STEM studies, and last but not least (3) founding a bi-lingual University which would have courses in both Hungarian and Serbian.

As future research the author intends to compare the status of Hungarian women in the higher education system of Serbia to the status of male students and professors from both other minority ethnic groups (e.g. Slovak, Romanian) and the majority population (i.e. Serbian). The comparison between women and men is important as it will allow us to identify whether there is an intersection of gender and ethnicity-based discrimination in the higher education system.

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Abstract

The goal of this paper is to analyze the effects of the language barrier faced by Hungarian women in the higher education system of Serbia. The analysis is based on twenty-four semi-structured interviews conducted with women students and teaching staff of Hungarian origin studying or working at the University of Novi Sad, Serbia. It will be shown that the majority of Hungarian women face a language barrier at the start of their studies, mostly because of their limited knowledge of the majority's language (i.e. Serbian). They spend a considerable amount of time and energy on learning Serbian instead of studying for their exams, which affects their success. It will be shown that the relevance of perfect majority language use varies in different scientific areas. The paper proposes measures which might allow Hungarian students to overcome the language barrier more easily.

Keywords: language barrier, Hungarian women, students, teaching staff

Biographical statement

KAROLINA LENDÁK-KABÓK was born January 9th, 1986 in Novi Sad, Serbia. She earned her bachelor's and master's degree at the Faculty of Law, University of Novi Sad. She passed her bar exam in Novi Sad. She is a fourth year PhD student at the Center for Gender studies, University of Novi Sad, Serbia. Her research focuses on women members of the Hungarian national minority and their position in the higher education system of Serbia. She is an author and co-author of more than ten scientific papers, presented in journals and both international and national conferences. Karolina speaks Hungarian, Serbian and English, and has a B1 level knowledge of the German language. In 2013 she was awarded the three-year "Collegium Talentum" scholarship funded by the Hungarian government. In the winter semester of 2014/2015 she was included in the Hungarian National Excellence Program for PhD students living outside the borders of Hungary. She is an active member of the Association of

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