IS HUNGARIAN ‘BLOWN OFF ITS FEET’ BY THE ENGLISH-DOMINATED CMC CHANNELS?

Self-regulative methods and the preservation of Hungarian

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Abstract. The multilingual nature of communication on the internet raises a number of questions about the effect of this technology on individual languages. This article addresses some of those questions by considering different ways in which languages other than English can be affected by CMC: by the impact of the different communication genres CMC has generated; by the prevalent use of the English language in CMC; and by the constraints and opportunities that arise from the technology itself. The study focuses on the way in which one specific language - Hungarian - responds to the impact of CMC. It reviews the findings of recent Hungarian and international research, and concludes that although there is an acknowledgement that the technology has an effect on languages such as Hungarian, the specific effects have not yet been the subject of systematic research. In response, this paper presents the findings of some exploratory research on the use of special Hungarian characters with diacritics in ICT. In particular, it looks at the strategies employed by Hungarian speakers to avoid misunderstanding, and also considers the occurrences of intentional misunderstanding as a source of humour and language play.
1. Introduction

1.1 The Impact of the Internet on Languages Other Than English

With the appearance of new channels of communication, new genres\(^1\) and a novel ways of communication have appeared over the last 30 years (see Crystal, 2004; Herring, 2004). Languages used for computer-mediated communication (CMC) are undergoing unprecedented changes that not only affect various levels of the languages system, but also thinking and, generally speaking, culture.

The multilingual Internet provides a meeting place for different languages and cultures and provides an opportunity for these languages to influence each other. Au fond, this influence is rather one-sided. The English language, experiencing a change process in its linguistic character itself, has an effect on all other languages due to numerous reasons. In addition to being a world-language for various fields of human life, English has been the language of the newest technologies; it was the language of the Internet when it came to existence and remained its predominant language since then (Crystal, 2004: 20).

There are three ways in which languages other than English are affected by this new technology: firstly, the language system adapts to meet the requirements of the new facilities and constraints of the new channel and different communication genres; secondly, it adopts and incorporates features from the English language, most noticeably in the area of the lexicon; and thirdly, it adopts strategies to address the problems that arise because the technology was initially designed for and by English speaking professionals. (Crystal, 2004: 21, Danet & Herring, 2003).

1.2 Aims and Research Background

In this paper our intention is to describe the changes the new medium initiates in the Hungarian language. By analysing data from synchronous chat and e-mails, we intend to give insights into ways in which Hungarian CMC is shaped not only by linguistic and social factors, but also by technological factors. This paper presents an overview of findings in the latest research and a recent, small-scale study about the adaptation of the Hungarian writing system to the new communication environments.

The rationale for conducting such a study originate in the works of the seminal scientists of Internet language usage. At the end of 2003 a special issue of Computer-Mediated Communication was published (Danet & Herring, 2003). An issue, entirely devoted to the multilingual Internet, pointed out that the research literature in English on CMC has focused almost exclusively on emergent practices in English, neglecting

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\(^1\) Static communication genres e.g. webpages, blogs; not synchronous genres e.g. bulletin boards or discussion forums, e-mail, synchronous genre e.g. chat
developments within populations communicating online in other languages. Among other topics, Herring and Danet called for papers on the effect of the English language and Internet language on CMC in local languages. They raised questions about the adaptation of different writing systems, the possible problems and the social, political or economic consequences.

David Crystal expresses his worries about the dominance of the English language and proposes an exploration of various situational manifestations of CMC in order to understand its effect on individual languages and on language in general (Crystal, 2004). He proposes that understanding how different language varieties are used will show us how CMC might shape the language. (Crystal, 2001:23).

In our interpretation, the description of individual appearances is on the one hand recognition of results of a change process, on the other hand a basis of comparison for other languages that might face a similar situation. In addition, describing how the individual users and speech communities adapt linguistically to the constraints and facilities of the new channel might be a step towards the description of the universal features of CMC.

1.3 THE PAST AND PRESENT SITUATION OF HUNGARIAN

Besides it being the mother tongue of one of our authors, our reason for choosing Hungarian as the subject of this analysis is that during its history, Hungarian has already proven its ability to cope with foreign influences.

During the centuries it always had an exposed situation: embedded between its Slavic neighbours, it had managed close intercultural communication, endured and got used to the influence of the ruling languages. Spoken by 15 million people (of whom only 10 million live within the borders of Hungary), Hungarian originates from the Finno-Ugric language area, it’s closest relatives being some minor languages in Siberia. Its coexistence with the old Turkish language around 1000 ad, the Slavic and Latin influence, the official German language during the Habsburg administration, and the Russian reign all left their marks on the language.

The last decade of the 20th century saw the beginning of a massive English influence. At present, according to The Economist, in central Europe “knowledge of English has become a basic skill of modern life comparable with the ability to drive a car or use a personal computer.”(Europe: After Babel, 2004)

2. Directions and findings of the latest research

2.1 HUNGARIAN BACKGROUND

Nowadays researchers in Hungary have turned towards preserving the language from decay and destabilisation. The proportionally high number of studies reflects the
concerns of today’s linguists. Recent studies raise the questions of influence of English on Hungarian (Zimányi, 2004); issues about Hungarianisation (i.e. the process of adapting and incorporating new elements into the Hungarian language) (Minya, 2005); preservation and language politics (Bódi, 2000; Bódi, 2002; Grétsy, 2004) or the issues of software translation and computational linguistics (Prószéky, 2001).

In his article about the influence of English Zimányi sets out to focus on the recent changes in the Hungarian language (Zimányi, 2004). He examines the manifestation of the influence on all levels of the linguistic system, starting from pronunciation, through orthography, vocabulary, and grammar up to translation problems and communicative patterns.

Zimányi casts light upon new trends and phenomena that might have an effect on the thinking and the everyday language usage of the Hungarian-speaking society: e.g. the unusual intonation, stress and increased speech tempo resulting in swallowed syllables and the deterioration of articulation; the appearance of a reversed word order in attribute construction alien to Hungarian thinking; the spread of word-to-word translation in the media and advertising promoting morphologically and grammatically incorrect language usage. He also mentions the problem of dates: in Hungarian the year precedes the month, and the month precedes the day. The author states, that because the English and the Hungarian orthography are both used in present-day Hungary due to the computing technologies, the interpretation of dates is often ambiguous.

The findings of Zimányi can be applied to the research of computer-mediated Hungarian to a great extent, even though he does not provide data about the influence of Internet language and the influence of the technicalities of the new channel.

This is also the case with Zoltán Bódi’s article about the effects of the language usage of IT and the strategy of language politics. (Bódi, 2000). Bódi makes a distinction between 4 communicative genres on the Internet (Web pages, bulletin boards, e-mails and synchronous chat) and after the discussion of their pragmatic features, he states that the new semiotic situations require the formation of a new language strategy. Bodi mentions speediness as the most characteristic feature of the communication types. He concludes that the increased speed of communication results in simplifying and shortening utterances and the lack of linguistic elaboration. As the author does not quote data to support his statements, it is difficult to identify the manifestations of simplifying and shortening, and to ascertain whether he included the difficulties caused by the technology in his statements.

2.2 INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH

Although the influence of English and the influence of the new linguistic genres have been introduced in previous studies, the issues of the effect of the technology have been mentioned only in a few.

In the previously cited issue of the Journal of CMC, as a response to the questions about the adaptation of writing systems, D. Palfreyman and M. al Khalil published an essay on ASCII-ised Arabic (Palfreyman & al Khalil, 2003), but I am not aware of any other studies that address this question directly.
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When talking about the role of the Internet as a strengthening factor for the position of English, Crystal points out the practical difficulties (e.g. the representation of a language’s letters accurately) languages other than English might face (Crystal, 2004:90). In his book on “Netspeak”, when discussing the Internet’s linguistic influence on vocabulary and graphology, he mentions the case of Spanish and Portuguese (Crystal, 2001:19), the alphabet of which had been extended by the letter “w” since the arrival of then Internet. However, he does not explore this phenomenon in depth.

In Hungarian’s case, in spite of the fact, that people generally are aware and anxious about certain aspects of the technological constraints, there do not appear to be any studies dealing with this issue.

3. Writing without diacritics

3.1 Background of Technical Constraints

The most striking practical difficulty Hungarian faces is the representation of its distinctive letters. Before presenting the study itself, we would like to lay out some background to introduce the position of Hungarian. First we will discuss the history and present situation of the character sets used for data transfer in Internet settings, and the difficulties arising from them. We will then provide some explanation about the Hungarian writing system. To understand the importance of the correct representation of Hungarian letters we will discuss the functions and distinguishing nature of the vowel sounds in Hungarian.

3.1.1 History of technical resources

The first protocols devised to carry data on the Internet were developed for the English alphabet based on ASCII character set. The original coding only contained the basic

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2 The assumption is made based on my own observations in different forums, but see e.g. a public on-line discussion with a linguist: [http://chat.gyaloglo.hu/tudos7/bodi_archiv.html](http://chat.gyaloglo.hu/tudos7/bodi_archiv.html) (Hungarian), or the prophecies of a humorous article about the future of Hungarian and the disappearance of the Hungarian accents: [http://index.hu/franko/ujmagyar/](http://index.hu/franko/ujmagyar/) (Hungarian).

3 ASCII stands for American Standard Code for Information Exchange. The ASCII character set, established in 1968, consists of 128 characters, of which 96 are visible (the others being hidden codes). These include the Latin letters most commonly used in European languages (each in upper and lower case), numerals, punctuation marks and some other common symbols such as %. Each of these characters is represented by a 7-digit binary number; the limit of 128 characters is inherent in this 7-bit system. Later, more extensive character sets such as Latin allow for an ‘extended’ character set of 256 different characters. More recent standards include Unicode (based on a 16-bit system allowing 65,536 basic characters), which claims to be able to code every single known character. (adapted from Palfreyman & al Khalil, 2003)
English letters, so in the earliest periods Hungarian texts either had no diacritics or used alternative signs, such as apostrophes or colons.

Nowadays with the UNICODE coding the special Hungarian characters are present, but some difficulties still exist. In programming different character sets are used, so the same character codes can be the representations of totally different letters. As a result, even though the Hungarian character might be present in the character set, the text appearing on the screen will not necessarily contain the correct letters. In fact, in most such cases the text becomes enigmatic and indecipherable, with complicated codes and numbers replacing the original Hungarian letters. It is even more so with foreign computers or foreign servers that do not support Hungarian fonts.

3.1.2 Hungarian writing system

Hungarian has 14 vowel phonemes. The vowel phonemes are pairs of long and short vowels. The 14 sounds are manifested with 5 basic vowels (a, e, i, o, u). The remaining is depicted with the help of three diacritics: ‘ (in the case of á, é, í, ó, ú) ” (in the case of ö, ü). The single and double acute accent normally indicates the extended length of its short pair, except in the case of á and é, where the position of the tongue descends and the method of production changes as well.

As the diacritics stand for distinguishable vowel sounds, they distinguish meaning as well. Not only do they appear in minimal pairs, but also in suffixes, where they indicate grammatical functions. Problems might arise in cases like kor-kör-kőr all written as kor, or tört-tőrt-tor all written as tor.

If a text is written without diacritics, the interpretation takes a much longer time (and even requires practise), and due to the multiple readings quite often results in misunderstanding. Hungarian is an agglutinative language, where most grammatical

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4 E-mail extracts with wrong coding:
1.) “Az éacutegat beleraktam az akv&aacute;riumba &eacute;s av&iacutez-felsz&iacutenre k&ampouml;&ampouml;tm&ampouml;l&ampouml;lmb&ampouml;mlet.”
2.) hi&ampouml;pa n&amp;ouml;h&amp;ouml;j&amp;ouml;ny &amp;ouml;ve ma&amp;ouml;r annak, hogy &amp;ouml;gyt at az &amp;ouml;r&amp;ouml;g v&amp;ouml;r-sunkba.
3.) Kl&amp;ouml;rk ne &amp;ouml;r&amp;ouml;lnek mi&amp;ouml;g m&amp;ouml;l&amp;ouml;bb mell&amp;ouml;kkjes betuvel, mert most megint minden&amp;ouml;le huley jelet irt.

5 The different vowel sounds of Hungarian, method of production and written representation (typical table format of the Hungarian grammar books).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Horizontal movement of tongue</th>
<th>Low (produced at the back)</th>
<th>High (produced at the front)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High tongue position</td>
<td>u  i</td>
<td>ü  í</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle tongue position</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>ö</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower tongue position</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The lowest tongue position</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movement of the lips</th>
<th>rounded</th>
<th>unrounded</th>
<th>Rounded</th>
<th>unrounded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Length of pronunciation</td>
<td>short</td>
<td>long</td>
<td>short</td>
<td>long</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
information is given through suffixes. Grammatical functions, usually expressed by word order in other languages, are expressed by the inflectional system, thus making it more difficult to deduce the meaning of a certain word from the context.

In data collected from synchronous chat channels we found instances where it is impossible to tell what exactly the speaker meant. In the following example the chat user did not use disacritics, so the word „meglepett” can be read both „meglepett” as well as „meglépett”.

\[ X: \textit{katicank meglepett} \]

In the first case the sentence would translate as “Our Kate left the room”, in the second instance “Our Kate surprised me”. Due to its ambiguous interpretation the other participants chose not to respond, thus anticipating a possible misunderstanding.

3.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND DATA COLLECTION

After reviewing data from various Internet genres it became clear, that even though the advance in technology produces less constraint these days, the usage of diacritics is by no means consistent. We found instances, such as the one above, where the constrained use of diacritics makes the interpretation of utterances ambiguous, in Schegloff et. al’s (1977:363) terms acting as a trouble source.\(^6\)

In the light of the preceding discussion, our aim in the remainder of this paper is to find out how the language adapts to such a situation: what strategies Hungarian language users invented to avoid cases like the one described above. How do they make sure that the word is interpreted in the intended way?

To answer these questions we examined data from synchronous and asynchronous discussion groups and e-mails. The instances of constrained use of diacritics found in the data were grouped on the basis of the strategies the languages users employed. The examples shown in the paper were then randomly chosen from these groups.

The data were drawn from the forums of a community website (www.wiw.hu) and from one of the most popular Hungarian web chat program accessible without restrictions at http://chat.gyaloglo.hu. The private discussions and e-mail extracts come from my acquaintances and friends with their permission to make them public. The chat extracts were altered to a certain extent: in GYALOGLO chat users register and stick to their nickname, so a chat nickname can be just as compromising in the electronic realm as a real name is beyond, therefore the nicknames were substituted by letters.

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\(^6\) In their analysis about repairs Schegloff et al. (1977: 363) defined the trouble source as a term generally referring to anything in a conversation that is treated as repairable by the participants. By repair they meant the mechanism by which a speaker interrupts the ongoing sequence of talk in order to deal with problems in hearing, speaking, or understanding.
3.3 LINGUISTIC MANIFESTATIONS TO AVOID AMBIGUITY

3.3.1 Explanation
In the following extract the participant’s chosen strategy is explanation, i.e. inserting an extra utterance to describe the actual ambiguous letter in the word “dog”.

In the example below the observed element functions as a trouble source for misunderstanding. “Dog – dög” is a minimal pair in Hungarian, first one meaning dog (a certain type of a dog), while the second one literally means carcass, but in certain expressions it playfully means naughty.

\[
\begin{align*}
16:55:19 & \quad <Y> \text{ gonosz dog} \\
16:55:29 & \quad <X>:))))))) \\
16:55:30 & \quad <Y> \text{ o ket ponttal} \\
16:55:44 & \quad <X> \text{ aztanmiert? :)}
\end{align*}
\]

Translation
\[
\begin{align*}
16:55:19 & \quad <Y> \text{ evil naughty /dög/} \\
16:55:29 & \quad <X>:))))))) \\
16:55:30 & \quad <Y> \text{ o with two dots} \\
16:55:44 & \quad <X> \text{ why then? :)}
\end{align*}
\]

The first participant chooses to insert an explanatory sentence, as a self-initiated repair sequence to anticipate the misunderstanding. Typing three extra words, however, confronts the traditional attitude in synchronous CMC, where the most important feature of any writing style is that it must be fast.

3.3.2 Substituting signs
Due the necessity of speediness, besides inserting extra sequences, Hungarian language users might use substituting signs to anticipate misunderstanding. In the case below the writer is not using diacritics throughout the whole text, but when typing an expression that can be read in multiple ways (szoba/room and szóba/in this word), he wants to make the meaning obvious by using an apostrophe (flying accent).

An apostrophe is a close replacement of the Hungarian accent, and because it is not typically used in everyday communication (unlike e.g. in English in contracted forms), its interpretation is rather obvious.

Original (e-mail)
Egy kicsit felreértettetek. (aszem eleg e betut raktam az elozo szo'ba :) 

With diacritics
Egy kicsit félreértettetek. (aszem elég e betűt raktam az előző szóba :) 

Translation
I think you misunderstood (I hope I put enough “e”-s in the previous word)

The idea of substituting characters identifiable by every Hungarian speaker reaches back to the period before the UNICODE coding, when the necessity to represent the Hungarian letters correctly led to the introduction of these signs. Besides the single flying accent (apostrophe), colon /:/, umlaut /~/ and hyphenation marks // were used, the previous two standing for the double accent in ö, while the later representing the double accents of õ or ű. Nevertheless, colon, umlaut and hyphenation marks are all generally used characters in Hungarian writing, and their interpretation can be just as ambiguous as the accentless letters’. The usage of these characters in Hungarian CMC is therefore not frequent.

3.3.3. Diacritics

Even though most often technical limitations are cited as the reason for writing without diacritics, other factors – e.g. speed – reinforce this tendency. In these cases the technical background is provided, so the constraints of the technology do not apply, the ambiguous words can be typed with accents even if the accents are not used throughout the whole text.

Original (e-mail)

vettem egy kis akvariumot!!! meg sok színes üveggömböt.
Az agat beleraktam az akvariumba és a vízfelszínre koreszortam az üveggömböket.
meglökk egyet, lassan odébbuszik és az egész kicsit atrendeződik

How it should be with diacritics

vettem egy kis akváriumot!!! meg sok színes üveggömböt.
Az ágat beleraktam az akváriumba és a vízfelszínre köröszórtam az üveggömböket.
meglökk egyet, lassan odébbuszzik és az egész kicsit átrendeződik.

Translation

bought an aquarium!!! and a couple of glass ornaments.
I put a branch in the aquarium and poured the ornaments on the surface of the water. if I stir it a bit, the whole composition takes a different form.

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7 We base this statement on the results of a quick survey we conducted about the usage of accents on different forums. The forums included expatriates with limited access to Hungarian keyboards and people living in Hungary. Opinions varied, as approximately half of the interviewees said that they do not use the special Hungarian vowels even if they have the technical conditions, because finding them on the keyboard takes longer time and is more complicated than typing without them.
The other example is taken from the postings of a forum for Hungarians living in London\textsuperscript{8}, where the accent is also used in one word only, whereas the rest of the posting is accentless.

Original

\textit{joe's l\ángos-house} \\
hallottatok már róla vmit?? egyik ismerősöm említette, \ldots allítolag magyar, meghogy tutijó.

With diacritics

\textit{joe's l\ángos-house} \\
hallottatok már rőla vmit?? egyik ismerősöm emlőttette, \ldots allítólag magyar, meghogy tutijó.

Translation

\textit{joe's l\ángos-house} (lángos is a special Hungarian bread-like cake) \\
have you heard anything about it?? A friend of mine mentioned it\ldots allegedly it's Hungarian and phenomenal.

In the above examples the writers use accents in one word only, i.e. when it is first mentioned. These words do not occur in CMC context very often, and the writers, presuming that the reader will not be familiar with the \textquotesingle\textquotesingle accentless\textquotesingle\textquotesingle form, type them correctly with diacritics. The first-mention theory is confirmed when at the second mention of the word \textquotesingle\textquotesingle glass ornament\textquotesingle\textquotesingle the writer leaves out the accents.

3.4\ INTENTIONAL AMBIGUITY AND LANGUAGE PLAY

In addition to being a trouble source and causing misunderstanding, the lack of diacritics can be the source of language play. The expressions with multiple readings give rise to increased opportunities for intentional misunderstandings. Humour and language play constitute one of the biggest attractions of CMC for many users (Crystal, 2004:64, or see Danet, 2001) and besides the liberated coherence patterns and grammar rules, Hungarian speakers also use their spelling for language play.

In the extract below participants joke about the ambiguity of the word \textquotesingle\textquotesingle rezso\textquotesingle\textquotesingle, which either stands for \textquotesingle\textquotesingle rezső\textquotesingle\textquotesingle meaning cooker or \textquotesingle\textquotesingle rezső\textquotesingle\textquotesingle, a male first name.

Original (chat-public window)

\textsuperscript{8} The website \url{www.wiw.hu} hosts more forums for expatriates. The extract was retrieved on 14\textsuperscript{th} January from \url{www.wiw.hu/pages/forum/topic.jsp?page=6&topicID=3011902}
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[17:36:15] <X> ul a rezson
[17:36:22] <Y> ki?
[17:36:26] <Z> jaja melegítem a vacsit:
[17:36:28] <X>Z
[17:36:36] <Z> na?
[17:36:52] <Y> nem üla rezsón
[17:37:09] <Y> magi azt mondta, hogy jeanny a rezsón ül
[17:37:16] <Y> vagy rezsón
[17:37:20] <Y> nemtom mire gondolkt
[17:37:22] <Y> nincs ékezete
[17:37:23] <Y> .-)))
[17:37:30] <X>nincs
[17:37:38] <Z> nem rezsón ülők
[17:37:41] <Z> széken:
[17:37:49] <X> rezsóóóóóóóóóóóóóóóóón te

Translation
[17:36:15] <X>sitting on a rezso
[17:36:22] <Y> who?
[17:36:26] <Z> yeah heating up the dinner:)
[17:36:28] <X>Z
[17:36:36] <Z> so?
[17:36:52] <Y> is not sitting on a rezsó
[17:37:09] <Y> someone says Z is sitting on a rezsó
[17:37:16] <Y> or rezsó
[17:37:20] <Y> I do not know what she had in mind
[17:37:22] <Y> she has no accents
[17:37:23] <Y> .-)))
[17:37:30] <X> she hasn’t
[17:37:38] <Z> I’m not sitting in a rezsó
[17:37:41] <Z> on a chair:)
[17:37:49] <X> on a rezsóóóóóóóóóóóóóóóóóóóóóóóóón te

3.5 INCONSISTENT USE OF DIACRITICS

In a considerable number of extracts I was unable to detect a pattern in the usage of diacritics. Users, who are obviously able to access the correct Hungarian letters, use them randomly, without recognisable consistency.

One user on the previously cited forum states, that he finds these letters annoying, it’s hard to memorise their position, and in spite of using a Hungarian keyboard, he refrains from typing Hungarian letters.
4. Conclusion

The phenomenon of writing without diacritics originates apparently in the lack of technical support, but the ways users get around this difficulty, and the ways in which they write without diacritics where this constraint does not apply, raise questions not only about the language, but also about community and culture. These issues include the increased interactivity and the consciousness about the language, the consequences of accentless writing and its effect on non-computer mediated writing or the competence necessary to produce and decipher accentless texts. We are not aware of studies about these issues: no data have been collected and no research conducted. The examples presented in this essay were demonstrations of one tendency in the language, but to investigate how consistent this usage is across interactions and across users would also require a bigger scale research.

It wasn’t the aim of this essay to reflect on all the consequences English and ICT have on Hungarian. Our aim was to introduce the ways the language responds to technological and linguistic difficulties and to give a basis for comparison for languages in similar situation as well as to cast the light upon these issues for the designers and programmers of future communication tools.

Adam Nadasdy, poet and linguist compares Hungarian to a golden cage (Nadasdy, 2000), with its (too) distinctive letters and sounds, word stock and structure, which is in fact so different to the other Indo-European languages that it became a favourite starting point for researchers in the field of comparative linguistics (Grétsy, 2004). The survival of the language that encapsulates the national history and a large part of the community’s cultural identity is vital in the life of a nation. Golden cage Hungarian might be, but it fought its way through centuries and today it is developing its own strategies to adapt to the new communication channels and technological developments.

References


