

Bilingualism: Bane or Boon?



Hungarians in Romania

Up until a few decades ago, the academic consensus – along with public opinion – was that bilingualism is detrimental to the individual and society. Nowadays, that has all changed and the new consensus is that bilingualism is enriching and advantageous both for the individual and society. Unfortunately, both sentiments are facile and reductive. Bilingualism – just as monolingualism – is neither good nor bad in itself. What matters is what we make of it, as a recent article about language policy and language ideologies in [Székely Land](#) (Kiss, 2011) reminds us.

Székely Land is a region of three counties with a bit over 800,000 inhabitants in Transylvania in Romania (the large green part in the center of the map). Also known as *Székelyföld* in Hungarian, *Ținutul Secuiesc* in Romanian, *Szeklerland* in German and *Terra Siculorum* in Latin, its many names are indicative of the region's complex history. Since medieval times, Székely Land has been settled by Székely Hungarians and formed an autonomous region within the Hungarian Kingdom until the middle of the 19th century. While Székely Land lost its autonomy in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, it continued to form part of Hungary until it was awarded to Romania after World War I with the [Treaty of Trianon](#). In the 1940s, Székely Land became again part of Hungary for another five years and has been part of Romania ever since 1946. For most of the 1950s and 1960s, Székely Land was administered as the [Hungarian Autonomous Province](#) within Socialist Romania. The Hungarian Autonomous Province was dissolved in 1968, one year after [Ceauşescu](#) became head of state. For the next 20 years, the Romanian authorities pursued a policy of “Rumanization,” which involved the mass resettlement of ethnic Romanians in Székely Land and the resettlement of Székely Hungarians with higher education outside of Székely Land in other parts of Romania. A quick way to sum up the history of Székely Hungarians throughout most of the 20th century might thus be to say that they have been messed around.

In post-communist Romania, the minority rights of Székely Hungarians are being protected by the constitution, as this was a key requirement for EU ascension in 2007. Furthermore, Székely Hungarians constitute the most vocal and best organized minority group in contemporary Romania. Despite the fact that their numbers continue to shrink due to emigration, the position of Székely Hungarians in Romania is often considered exemplary in contemporary Eastern Europe, as in [this quote](#) from US President Clinton in the 1990s:

Who is going to define the future of this part of the world? Slobodan Milosevic, with his propaganda machine and paramilitary forces which compel people to give up their country, identity, and property, or a state like Romania which has built a democracy respecting the rights of ethnic minorities?

So, how does this 'model minority' fare when it comes to bilingualism? Not great, according to Kiss (2011). Székely Hungarians, like minority groups elsewhere, aspire to full socio-economic participation through high-level bilingualism in the ethnic language (Hungarian) and the state language (Romanian). Indeed, full participation through bilingualism is a constitutional right Székely Hungarians enjoy in democratic Romania. However, in reality, bilingualism is difficult to achieve and social mobility is currently tied to either giving up Hungarian and becoming monolingual in Romanian or giving up the ancestral homeland and emigrating to Hungary.

Why is it that bilingualism does not work for most Székely Hungarians despite the fact that that is what they want and that it is state policy? The problem is slightly different for each language and I will discuss each in turn.

Hungarian, the mother tongue of Székely Hungarians, has been severely damaged by decades of more or less active anti-Hungarian policies. Thus, contemporary Hungarian-medium education suffers from a lack of qualified teachers, appropriate teaching materials and specialized dictionaries. Vocational teachers whose mother tongue is Hungarian, for instance, feel they cannot teach vocational subjects in Hungarian because they lack the technical vocabulary. Since the end of communism, many advanced textbooks have been translated into Hungarian but this has been done in an ad hoc manner and there is a lack of standardization as textbook translations are neither moderated nor are translators necessarily technically competent.

It would seem that these problems of Hungarian teaching could be easily solved with the provision of professional development by teacher training institutions in Hungary and through importing teaching materials from Hungary and/or standardizing local textbooks with reference to norms operating in Hungary. However, this seemingly straightforward solution is not an option because the Romanian state insists on its educational sovereignty and prohibits these measures – the fact that Hungary is a fellow member of the European Union notwithstanding! In sum, despite constitutional language rights, Székely Hungarians in practice largely lack the opportunity to extend their mother tongue into the domains of vocational and higher education.

Romanian doesn't fare much better but for different reasons. In those parts of the country where they constitute a minority, Romanian Hungarians usually attend Romanian-medium schools and use Romanian on a daily basis outside the home – and more and more of those Hungarians are finding it more convenient to simply switch to Romanian altogether. However, the situation is different in Székely Land, where Hungarians continue to constitute more than three quarters of the population and where Hungarian-medium education is widely available. Lacking the opportunity to practice Romanian in everyday life, Székely Hungarians rely on the school to learn Romanian. Romanian is indeed a compulsory subject throughout the entire education system and some subjects such as Romanian history have to be taught through the medium of Romanian even in Hungarian-medium schools. Even so, the Romanian proficiency of many students is so poorly developed that they fail final school examinations at the end of 8th grade and even at the end 12th grade they often don't speak Romanian "as correctly and fluently as expected" (p. 241).

The reasons for the unsatisfactory outcomes of Romanian instruction lie in teaching methods, which Kiss (2011: 257) terms 'worst-practice.' In Székely Land schools, Romanian is taught not as a foreign language but as a first language, including a heavy emphasis on literary analysis. Consequently, comprehension is limited and students only succeed by memorizing. For instance, a teacher of Romanian Language and Literature in a Székely Land high-school comments as follows:

Competence in Romanian doesn't develop even in twelve years' time. Naturally, this can be explained by the fact that the textbook that we use was written for Romanian students, and they do not expect that students will possibly have any difficulties with them, and none of the textbooks concentrate on communicative language use. So, our students learn by heart everything they have to know for the exams. (p. 256)

Again, it would seem that there is a straightforward solution for this problem, namely to employ foreign language teaching methods rather than mother-tongue teaching methods. However, the term 'foreign language' with reference to Romanian is apparently so ideologically laden that context-appropriate teaching methods have largely become unthinkable on the national level.

Székely Hungarians aspire to high levels of bilingualism as a resource for socio-economic participation in Romania and Europe. Despite constitutional guarantees, however, in practice their bilingualism is a barrier to full participation. The problems they are facing have nothing to do with bilingualism per se and everything with ideologies about what it means to be Romanian. These ideologies disallow pragmatic solutions to local problems and ensure that, for the time being, bilingualism remains a problem for Székely Hungarians.



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