

REVIEW

on the dissertation of Edina Zsolcsak-Dimitrova
on the topic

TYOLOGY OF ERRORS IN THE HUNGARIAN INTERLANGUAGE OF BULGARIAN NATIVE SPEAKERS

submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the educational and scientific degree *doctor* (Ph.D.) in the professional field 2.1 *Philology*, scientific specialty *General and Comparative Linguistics (Hungarian and Bulgarian)*

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The dissertation, presented by Edina Zsolcsak-Dimitrova – Assistant in the Department of Hungarian Studies – is a serious step towards establishing methodological criteria and norms for teaching Hungarian in the Bulgarian language environment. For the first time, a more comprehensive study of the types of errors is proposed in order to draw typological conclusions. Moreover, the contrastive analysis of the errors in the Hungarian interlanguage of Bulgarians has not been the subject of an independent study in the linguodidactic literature.

The research is focused on the analysis of errors made by Bulgarians studying Hungarian, clarifying the possible reasons for their admission and the ways to overcome them in order to achieve high academic performance. For the realization of the set goal the author sets several tasks, the solution of which determines the scope of the research. They are reduced to an overview of the methods for contrastive analysis and error analysis, to a description of the main phonetic, morphosyntactic and lexical characteristics of the Hungarian language in view of the difficulties they may create for Bulgarian native speakers, to systematize and categorize the errors that appear in the Hungarian interlanguage.

The topic is relevant, significant and fits into the avalanche-like increasing pragmatization of language descriptions for educational purposes. Its development implies the

establishment of good practices and solutions that would support the elaboration of an adequate methodological strategy to optimize the process of teaching and learning Hungarian as a second language. Moreover, the results of the research can be directly applied in the education of students of Hungarian Philology.

Collecting language material from foreign language learners, identifying their errors, classifying them according to certain criteria, serves as an indicator of the effectiveness of one or another methodological solution and orients the teacher how best to structure and present the material to students. In this sense, the doctoral student correctly puts forward her research thesis.

The dissertation has a total volume of 239 pages (main text – 186 pages) and consists of an introduction, three chapters, divided into paragraphs, conclusion, closure, bibliography and appendix presenting the language corpus. The structure is clear and logical, the used research tools correspond to the set goals and objectives of the research and are applied correctly. The credit for this also goes to the competent scientific guidance.

The short introduction (pp. 5–7) points out the role of the contrastive comparison between languages and the study of errors made by the learners in the process of acquisition a foreign language, after which the structure of the work is concisely presented and the method, goal and tasks are outlined.

The first chapter (pp. 8–38) sets the theoretical and methodological frame of the study. It synthesizes the essence of contrastive linguistics, presents its ancestors, as well as different approaches to comparing two languages (propounded by R. Lado, R. Wardhau, R. Stockwell, K. James), indicating their strengths and weaknesses. The sources are well selected according to the research topic. However, some findings need to be reformulated: e.g. on p. 8: „According to the Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics, learning a second language is the process of learning a second (or foreign) language”; on p. 11: „Contrastive analysis cannot predict all the difficulties of the learners, and there will always be difficulties that cannot be predicted by contrastive analysis.”

In outlining the theoretical basis of contrastive linguistic analysis and the areas of its application, Edina Zsolcsak demonstrates skills to systematize, analyse and summarize the views of various researchers. The well-mastered theoretical foundations presuppose the correctness of the subsequent analysis of a concrete empirical material. Familiarity with the basic postulates in the theory of errors and with the importance of error analysis as an applied theoretical model for deriving applicable in foreign language learning linguodidactic conclusions leads to the belief that in combining comparative analysis of mother tongue and

foreign language with the analysis of the deviations from the language norms made by learners is set the diagnostic and prognostic potential of the contrastive linguistic approach in the foreign language teaching.

This determined Edina Zsolcsak's choice to place the main emphasis in her study on the method of so-called contrastive error analysis, developed by the Hungarian linguist Laszlo Budai. This introduces a new look on the traditional for the Bulgarian linguistic-didactic literature approach to the characterization and analysis of interlanguages. The dissertation author is well acquainted with different conceptions of interlanguage and the systems for categorization of errors in it: proof of this are the given illustrative examples from the Hungarian interlanguage of Bulgarian native speakers to the types of classifications of Nemser and Corder.

However, E. Zsolcsak quite purposefully dwells on the model of Budai as the most adequate for the purposes of her research. The contrastive analysis allows to determine the potential interference, to predict the typical difficulties in the process of learning the Hungarian language by Bulgarians, and the analysis of errors, in turn, takes into account the realized native language interference. At the heart of the applied model is the analysis of “current errors spontaneously made by foreign language learners or provoked in a test or exam situation” and not of “the possibilities for errors predicted by contrastive analysis” (cf. p. 27). This provides a reliable basis not only for identifying errors, but also for clarifying some of the main reasons that cause them, as well as for developing a strategy for correcting and minimizing errors.

E. Zsolcsak's experience as a teacher of Hungarian for foreigners allows her to boldly enter the issue in order to outline some of the most difficult features of the Hungarian language and to convince the reader of the advantages of the chosen model: combining theoretical approaches and practical observations, the Budai model is designed to increase the effectiveness of foreign language learning by making it a conscious process. The main positive effect of the application of contrastive error analysis is clearly stated: „supporting the optimization of input data in the process of foreign language acquisition” (p. 31).

The review of the Bulgarian-Hungarian research in the field of contrastive linguistics made at the end of the first chapter not only ensures a smooth transition between the presented theoretical formulations and the subsequent concrete observations on the language systems of Hungarian and Bulgarian, but also gives an opportunity to highlight more clearly the new perspective that the dissertation of Assistant Edina Zsolcsak introduces in foreign language

teaching and comparative linguistic issues, expanding the research paradigm in the direction of contrastive error analysis in the Hungarian interlanguage.

However, I think that some of the studies included in this part are described in unnecessary detail, e.g. the presented content of “Hungarian Grammar. Forms, Functions, Relationships”, moreover that this work, although defined by the dissertation author as “an excellent resource for teaching contrastive linguistic”, is not written in a comparative plan, and in this sense should occupy a peripheral place, if at all needs to be included in the review of Bulgarian-Hungarian contrastive studies.

The second chapter (pp. 39–105) is extremely informative. Based on academic grammars of the Hungarian language and Hungarian grammars for foreigners, the peculiarities of the Hungarian language are described in view of the difficulties that accompany its teaching and learning in Bulgarian speaking environment; typological contrasts between the two languages are also outlined, which become a stumbling block for learners. Comparatively with Bulgarian, the main characteristics of the Hungarian language at the phonetic and morphosyntactic level are overviewed. The specifics of the inflectional suffixes in Hungarian compared to the prepositions in Bulgarian are considered in detail; the Hungarian case and verb system, the discussion issues related to them and the challenges they face by the teachers of Hungarian as a foreign language are described thoroughly. The dissertation author's desire to consider the described linguistic phenomena from the point of view of their applicability in practice is evident.

The greatest attention in the description of morphosyntactic relations in Hungarian is paid to the triple spatial system. It is defined as “more complex than the Bulgarian one in terms of spatial descriptions” and as “one of the reasons for the high number of grammatical cases in the Hungarian language” (p. 57). The manifestations of the triple spatial system are presented sequentially in nouns, adjectives and numerals, in postpositions, pronouns, verbs and adverbs. The most typical and most frequently used equivalent prepositions of the respective Hungarian case endings are indicated in tabular form.

When examining the Hungarian verb system, significant differences with the Bulgarian language are pointed out, which became the main reason for the errors found in the Hungarian interlanguage. The given examples are interpreted adequately and convincingly. The author's observations contain important contributions to Hungarian-Bulgarian contrastive studies and linguodidactics. However, some of the allegations should be clarified, for example, the finding on page 47 that the postpositions in Hungarian “do not affect the form of the word to which they refer (which is a typical phenomenon in the suffixation of some

multivariate roots in Hungarian, for example Szófia – Szófiában ‘in Sofia’, étterem ‘restaurant’– éttermet ‘restaurant (accusative)’“ is incorrect. This does not apply to the group of so-called ragvonzó névutók ‘inflection governing postpositions’, which require the noun (or other nomina which is used as a noun) in front of them to get a specific inflectional suffix. Cf. : *iskola előtt*, but *iskolán belül* or *iskolával szemben*, *éttermen kívül*, etc.)

The exposition is illustrated with a large number of tables. However, the enumeration of many noun and verb paradigms, as well as rules for the use of certain grammatical categories (eg spatial suffixes, the two types conjugation of transitive verbs, paradigms of pronouns formed by locative inflections and postpositions) dilutes the text; some of them could be given as an appendix or presented in a more synthesized way, without listing all the forms, but only to indicate the mechanism of their formation and to illustrate their use in a few sentences. Probably the author's decision is dictated by the desire to give more information about the considered grammatical units in the Hungarian language.

In the third chapter (pp. 106–181) is duly described the language corpus (presented in the appendix to the dissertation), on which is performed the contrastive analysis of the errors in the Hungarian interlanguage. The source material used in the dissertation is excerpted from authentic texts of Bulgarians studying Hungarian as a foreign language. Various written works are processed: 102 essays on a free topic by students majoring in Hungarian Philology at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” and by students in a Hungarian course organized by the Hungarian Cultural Institute in Sofia, texts of native Bulgarian participants in a certificate exam in Hungarian as a foreign language, as well as 19 essays prepared by fourth-year students as term papers in Hungarian literature.

The author realizes the shortcomings of an analysis carried out on the basis of a limited corpus, in which some of the generally problematic language categories, such as the forms of postpositions with personal endings, the specific verb inflection *-lak/-lek* for a definite conjugation, etc., either do not occur at all or appear very rarely. That is why she decides to expand the corpus of essays with additional test material, including translation of separate sentences from Bulgarian and Hungarian and a grammar exercise to fill in the case endings. The initial data are processed correctly, therefore the obtained results can be considered reliable.

The organization of the empirical material provides a convincing basis for the formulated conclusions. The errors found in the processed written works are presented by language levels, and a classification of the most frequent types is proposed. Here again, the focus of the analysis is on the errors in the use of the locative suffixes related to the triple

spatial system, which – as it becomes clear in the course of the exposition – are „equally difficult for beginners and advanced” (p. 131). Therefore, it is no coincidence that the results of the experiment with first- and second-year students do not differ significantly when they are required not just to fill in a missing ending in the sentence, but to create a sentence or related text themselves, applying syntactic rules of varying complexity. This finding suggests that difficult-to-learn categories in Hungarian are for a long time an obstacle to communication, despite targeted efforts to overcome them through various learning tools.

It is important to note that Edina Zsolcsak not only registers the errors, but comments on them, with explanations and recommendations important for the structure of the learning process, in order to better the teaching methodology and to improve the achievements of students.

The positioning of subchapter 3.1.2. *Picture of the Bulgarian-Hungarian equivalents in the expression means of the triple spatial system: results of analysis based on data from literary texts and their translations* in the chapter *Features of the Hungarian interlanguage: a contrastive error analysis* seems controversial, because it comments on translation equivalents, not on authentic examples from learner corpus data, as the reader expects. Obviously, translation is used here as a means of highlighting similarities and differences and to illustrate the functional equivalence. However, no conclusions about „features of the Hungarian interlanguage” can be drawn on the basis of literary translations. Moreover, the conclusions on p. 146 related to the expression of spatial relations in the Hungarian and Bulgarian languages fit better into the content of the second chapter than of the third.

In my opinion the place of 3.1.3. *The triple system in the expression of time* is also rather in the second chapter (*Peculiarities of the Hungarian language with regard to its teaching to Bulgarians and typological contrasts with the Bulgarian language*), because it complements the presentation of the triple spatial system in the Hungarian language with new manifestations. Furthermore, no errors in the Hungarian interlanguage in relation to its temporal manifestations are considered at all, as in the other subsections of chapter three.

In *Conclusions* (pp. 182–185) the more typical errors that appear in the interlanguage of Bulgarian-speaking people studying Hungarian are summarized and presented in a synthesized form. Their admission is explained by various reasons: structural differences between the two languages, incomplete knowledge of the new language system, gaps in knowledge of the target language, native language interference, the influence of other foreign languages, incorrect learning and teaching strategies and others. Along with the conclusions from the analysis, the dissertation author makes specific proposals for overcoming some

interlingual differences in the process of teaching and learning Hungarian by native speakers of Bulgarian.

The *Closure* (p. 186) emphasizes the need for additional contrastive studies for the Hungarian-Bulgarian language pair. The statement that the presented work is only the beginning of in-depth activities aimed at the development of adequate teaching materials in Hungarian for Bulgarians sounds promising.

On the topic of the dissertation the author has six publications, three of which are in print. All of them are presented as reports at national and international scientific forums.

The *Abstract* (29 pages) correctly presents the structure and content of the dissertation. The contributions indicated by the dissertation author correspond to the actual achievements in the text. The cited authors and sources should be described in the abstract too, not only in the bibliography of the dissertation.

In conclusion, I will summarize that the diligence and efforts that the author has invested in writing the dissertation deserve to be appreciated. The presented work is a serious scientific elaboration with contributions in the field of contrastive and applied linguistics. That is why I propose to the Scientific Jury to vote for the award of the educational and scientific degree „Doctor” to Edina Zsolcsak-Dimitrova.

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