CHAPTER 7

The Language Question and the Paradoxes of Latin Journalism in Eighteenth-Century Hungary

Piroska Balogh

It has often been argued that the early modern period was one of the ‘emergence’, the ‘rise’ or the ‘triumph’ of the national vernaculars, at the expense of cosmopolitan Latin on the one hand and local dialects on the other. To the extent that this happened, the phenomenon was important for the creation of new ‘speech communities’ and eventually new trans-regional or super-regional loyalties. By 1750, the European linguistic system was very different from the medieval system, which had been divided between a living but non-classical Latin and regional dialects which were spoken rather than written. However, the simple statement that the vernaculars of Europe ‘rose’ is rather a crude one.¹

This statement by Peter Burke can be found in his 2004 volume *Languages and Communities in Early Modern Europe*. According to Burke, more comprehensive and differentiated models should be applied in cultural historical research concerning language usage and the awareness of social identity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He attempts to outline such a model with respect to, among other things, the cultural and sociological status of the Latin language in Europe. According to Burke, in eighteenth-century Europe Latin was not “a language without a speech community,” but “a language in search of community.” Potential users of the Latin language—that is, its eighteenth-century target communities—were predominantly “the Catholic Church and the Republic of Letters,” meaning Catholic clergymen, scholars, professors and their students, as well as “lawyers, officials, diplomats and travellers.”²

As the primary reason, Burke suggests that Latin appeared useful for creating a virtual international community identity for these linguistic and social communities: “Post-classical Latin, like the vernaculars, exemplifies the uses

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¹ P. Burke, *Languages and Communities in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge 2002), 61. The research project behind this study was supported by the János Bolyai Research Fellowship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

² Burke, *Languages*, 44.
of language in binding together a group. In this case, the people, who were bound together formed ‘a community of ideas’ or an ‘imagined community’ that was international in scope.” The erosion or alteration of this ambition, for various reasons, was reflected in changes to the hegemony of Latin. However, the author explores the local aspect of this process in less detail. One very productive approach is to interpret the eighteenth-century use of Latin as an element of community identity, following Burke; or as a symbol, as suggested by Françoise Waquet. Nevertheless, I believe that the function of identity formation is not necessarily ‘international in scope.’ Even when interpreted as a symbol, its function was not exclusively the representation (and subsequent elimination) of a ‘hegemonic cultural model’ among contemporaries. While I would therefore agree with these suggestions and models, I believe that, with targeted research, the models can be honed and made more useful at the level of local processes. A review of eighteenth-century Latin-language journalism in Hungary, such as I offer below, can be extremely valuable in this respect.

**Latin Journalism before 1790**

Latin-language publications have a special role in the history of eighteenth-century journalism in Hungary. Tellingly, the first successful attempt to create a newspaper in Hungary concerned the Latin-language *Mercurius Hungaricus / Mercurius Veridicus ex Hungaria*, which appeared between 1705 and 1710 on a

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3 Burke, *Languages*, 44.
5 “Latin disappeared because it no longer meant anything to the contemporary world. All that it had once embodied—a certain idea of humanity, a form of discrimination, a system of power, an universal outlook, with an underlying conception of society, its order, its standards—no longer carried meaning, or was being said differently, and the hegemonic cultural model to which it referred was now victoriously rivalled.” Waquet, *Latin*, 273.