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**Pluricentricity in foreign language teaching:
The case of English and German in the Hungarian education
system**

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1. Introduction

The study of linguistic pluricentricity can be dated back as far as the late 1970's, when Kloss (1978) first introduced the term, which was then refined, and rocketed to wide international acclaim, by Clyne (1992), who defined it as the presence of a language in multiple countries with a certain degree of official status. Very importantly, in Clyne's (1992) model, these countries function as the norm-setting centres of the language in question, and are home to its national standard varieties. English and German are two very good cases in point, with both of them being typical examples of a pluricentric language, even though they differ significantly from each other in terms of the nature of their pluricentricity. While English is spread all over the world as a result of its colonial past, the German-speaking world is largely restricted to a well-defined, geographically contiguous area in Central Europe (cf. Clyne, 1992, Muhr, 2005, and Schneider, 2011, among others). Obviously, linguistic pluricentricity has an important effect on language education too, and it has been widely accepted by theoreticians and language educators alike that the multiplicity of national standards has to be reflected in foreign language teaching (cf. for instance Muhr, 1996a or Jenkins, 2006).

It is against the above background that the present dissertation attempts to explore the role of linguistic pluricentricity in language teaching, with particular reference to the teaching of English and German as foreign languages in Hungary. Situated at the interface between sociolinguistics and language pedagogy, this project places the existing research findings in a novel, interdisciplinary, comparative theoretical framework, which can be applied to all levels and sub-systems of the education system, from curricula through textbooks to concrete classroom work. Throughout this entire dissertation, considerable emphasis is placed upon practical application opportunities, making it a relevant piece for all agents in the Hungarian education system, from practising teachers through teacher trainers, all the way to textbook authors and publishers.

2. Research question and hypotheses

The following section is devoted to the presentation of the research question and the hypotheses related to it, since it is going to be the ultimate aim of all the subsequent parts of the dissertation to answer that question and put those hypotheses to the test. To start with, the fundamental research question of the present study is the following: *What role does the linguistic diversity of English and German play in language teaching in the Hungarian education system?* This question is worth investigating in order to gain an insight into a

segment of foreign language teaching in the contemporary Hungarian education system that can have a major impact on language learners' and teachers' classrooms interactions as well as their beliefs about the languages they are learning, and also on the way these languages are presented in curricula and textbooks, and, through this, on the everyday practices in and outside of the foreign language classroom as well as the overall success of the language learning process.

In order to adequately answer the above question, the presence of pluricentricity in the education system needs to be investigated at two levels. First, on a macro level, the role of pluricentricity needs to be investigated in the legal–institutional framework of the Hungarian education system. This includes national and school level curricula, centralized exam requirements, as well as widely used textbooks that are available on the official school textbook list of the Educational Authority (Oktatási Hivatal) of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. As these factors have a profound effect on what is really happening in the actual classrooms, it can be expected that the way they relate to pluricentricity will determine teachers' and learners' beliefs and classroom interactions as well.

This brings us to the second, micro level, which is about teachers' and learners' classroom interactions, as well as their beliefs concerning the pluricentricity of English and German and its role in language teaching that are reflected by the emerging interaction patterns. To gain a comprehensive insight into the role of pluricentricity in the education system as a whole, it is not enough to only investigate the general, official characteristics of the system itself, but, moving to a more practical side, the individual participants in the education system (i.e. learners and teachers) need to be taken into consideration as well. After analyzing the system on a macro level, narrowing down the scope of the project onto this kind of individual, micro level can shed light on the practical realization of what is theoretically codified in the official documents of the legal–institutional framework.

Answering the above research question inevitably involves testing one's own hypotheses that are related to it. Based on my own experience as a language teacher and learner, but also on the basis of the literature reviewed in the dissertation, the following three hypotheses are investigated:

(1) Pluricentricity plays a marginal role in the legal–institutional framework of language teaching in the Hungarian education system.

(2) The marginal presence of pluricentricity in the legal–institutional framework results in teachers devoting relatively little attention to this aspect of language teaching in

practice. Consequently, as learners are more open to differing standards than their teachers, this creates a discrepancy between learners' and teachers' beliefs.

(3) A general prevalence of dominant over non-dominant varieties can be observed.

3. Analysis of the legal–institutional framework

The legal–institutional framework of foreign language education in Hungary is of paramount importance in the present project, since the documents that build up this framework (i.e. national and framework curricula, as well as various exam requirements) can be assumed to have an important influence on the actual classroom practices of teachers and learners alike, and through that, the entire teaching-learning process.

3.1. Curricula

3.1.1. The National Core Curriculum and pluricentricity

The current, 2020 version of the National Core Curriculum, which is in force today and is the official basis on which all institutionalized education has to be based in the Hungarian public school system, makes no mention of pluricentricity whatsoever. This fact has not only symbolic significance, but it also makes it more difficult (or at the very least, less self-evident) for textbook and examination developers, local curriculum planners and language teachers in this country to develop a more pluricentricity-oriented approach to language teaching.

Nevertheless, the National Core Curriculum does make a few general remarks which, even if only ever so subtly and indirectly, point towards the acceptance and dissemination of the plurality of standard norms in foreign language education. Furthermore, to mention one more positive aspect, a general openness to linguistic varieties and dialects is generally advocated too, which could in principle form an appropriate basis for a pluricentricity-oriented language education, but this is by far not realized in actual practice, as demonstrated in the following section on the framework curricula.

3.1.2. Framework curricula and pluricentricity

As framework curricula basically translate the general principles outlined by the core curriculum into more concrete and specific terms, this section presents all the examples of pluricentricity related statements that can be found in these documents to illustrate the way the aforementioned principles of the core curriculum are – or at times are not – put into practice.

The core curriculum and the framework curricula are in absolute concord in this regard, meaning that everything that has been noted with reference to the core curriculum holds true for the framework curricula as well. For example, target language cultures and countries are mostly referred to in plural, even though this is not entirely consistent, as such references occasionally appear in singular as well, at times even on the very same page where they have been used in their plural form earlier on.

The topic of pluricentricity is extremely marginalized in the Hungarian framework curricula, generally regardless of the level and the age of the students, with the single counterexample being the case of German at secondary level, where the degree of openness to pluricentricity by far exceeds that of the elementary level. This can be seen as a positive example, demonstrating that it is indeed possible to focus more on pluricentricity in such documents, once sufficient importance is given to this topic by the authors.

3.2. Exam requirements: A washback effect?

This section of the dissertation is based on an analysis of 36 English and German language examination papers and 16 matura examination papers, i.e. a total of 52 exams, as well as the related examination documentation (specifications and regulations), focusing on the presence of linguistic pluricentricity in these documents. The main conclusion to be drawn is that British English and Germany German dominate the analyzed exam materials, which supports Hypothesis 3. Furthermore, it can also be concluded that a much greater degree of pluricentricity than is currently the case would be needed in these exams, mainly because of their presumed washback effect.

Some pluricentric presence *can* be observed though, but it is rather limited, so it seems clear that linguistic pluricentricity is not at all an important consideration in the preparation of the materials for the exams analyzed, which, in turn, supports Hypothesis 1, which is about the marginal role of pluricentricity in the legal–institutional framework of language teaching in the Hungarian education system, of which language exams constitute an important part.

While the literature on the subject suggests that the multiplicity of standards should be represented at all levels of language (Muhr, 1993 and 1996a; Glaboniat et al., 2002), the examinations at hand focus on differences in vocabulary and pronunciation only. Furthermore, it is important to mention the neutrality of the beginner level, which is an essential principle in pluricentric theory, suggesting that it is best to focus more and more on pluricentricity from the intermediate level onwards (Christen and Knipf-Komlósi 2002, Glaboniat et al. 2002, Glauninger 2001, Muhr 1996a, Neuland 2011). In contrast, the

distribution of pluricentric content across the different levels of language proficiency in the analyzed materials is rather haphazard and uneven. It should also be noted that the slight pluricentric presence in the sample papers is not reflected at all in the official examination specifications and regulations, which make absolutely no mention of the pluricentricity of the languages concerned. Change is certainly needed in this area.

On the positive side, however, in line with the literature, it is mostly in the receptive skills (i.e. listening and reading) that these examination materials feature pluricentricity (cf. Muhr 1996b). Also, Goethe Zertifikat C1 in German and the ECL exam in English are generally speaking positive examples to follow. These examinations exhibit a relatively balanced pluricentric representation, which shows that this can be achieved if the developers of the examination materials are open to the diversity of linguistic standards.

4. Pluricentricity in textbooks

In this chapter, I compare two English and two German textbook series in terms of the application of the pluricentric model and the presentation of non-dominant standard varieties in them. In the case of German, I discuss the *Studio d* series by Cornelsen, which covers the entire CEFR scale from A1 to C1, as well as *Deutsch.com* (which was removed from the list in 2020 but was widely used while it was available), and the *Ideen* series, which was added to the list as its successor. Both have volumes at the A1, A2 and B1 levels, so at B2 and C1 level, I examine the *Sicher!* series by the same publisher. In English, I analyze the very widely used series *Pioneer* and *English File*, the third edition of the latter, by MM Publications and Oxford University Press, respectively.

The presentation of pluricentricity and non-dominant standards is examined in three areas: (1) vocabulary, as well as (2) reading and (3) listening comprehension, as the role of these three areas is very important in light of the literature reviewed at the beginning of the dissertation.

I want to emphasize that the use of the pluricentric model in language teaching would be beneficial in many respects, but it still plays only a marginal role in the textbook series under study, which is in line with previous findings in the literature (cf., among others, Ammon and Hägi, 2005: 33-37; Christen and Knipf-Komlósi, 2002: 17-19; Muhr, 1993: 119-122 or 1996b: 244, etc.), generally proving Hypothesis 1 right. Thus, the “meaningful coexistence” of norms suggested by Muhr (1996c: 42) is still absent in the textbooks analyzed over a quarter century after his observations – although there are some positive signs at

certain levels – and a very strong Germany German and British English dominance can be observed, which, in turn, supports Hypothesis 3.

The implication is that in the future, new textbooks should be developed with a more pluricentricity oriented mindset, building on the positive (but not yet sufficient) results already observed with *Deutsch.com*, *Sicher!* and *Pioneer*. Rather than ignoring these achievements (as in the case of *Ideen*), publishers should continue to develop their textbooks based on these positive examples. To achieve this pluricentric development, I offer the following suggestions to textbook developers:

- (1) Through more linguistic diversity in reading and listening texts, a balanced, multi-regional representation should be achieved in the receptive skills (cf. Muhr 1996a).
- (2) The communicative range of German as a foreign language (both within and outside the DACH(L) countries) should be maximised by addressing the variety of standard varieties as regularly as possible (cf. Knipf-Komlósi 2001, and Glaboniat et al. 2002).
- (3) The presentation of pluricentric content should take place in parallel with that of the target language cultures, but without reducing this content exclusively to cultural topics.
- (4) In general, pluricentricity should be addressed in as many ways as possible. Pluricentricity is “more than just knowing a bit of kitchen vocabulary” (Muhr 1996a: 141)
- (5) Beyond a neutral beginner level, the non-dominant varieties should gradually gain more and more ground (cf. Muhr 1996a).
- (6) Pluricentricity should manifest itself in all subsystems of language, not only in the field of lexis (cf. Muhr 1993, 1996a, Glaboniat et al. 2002).
- (7) In a pluricentricity-oriented textbook, at least 3-5% of all vocabulary elements should be of non-dominant origin (cf. suggestions in Muhr 1993 and Glaboniat et al. 2002), especially from the intermediate level onwards. Since these elements are partly presented in listening and reading texts, this can have a positive washback effect on pluricentric training of receptive skills.
- (8) The equivalent parallel forms of the different national varieties should really be introduced in parallel with each other, and the associated variety should always be clearly indicated.

The aim of the above proposals is to allow for the fullest possible reflection of linguistic reality, which should, without doubt, be one of the most important features of language teaching (cf. e.g. Hägi 2006: 180-182).

5. Teachers' and learners' classroom interactions and beliefs regarding pluricentricity: a quantitative perspective

At this point, the dissertation moves on from the macro to the micro level of the investigation, shifting the focus from the strictly speaking systemic characteristics of language education in Hungary to the classroom interactions of learners and teachers, as well as their beliefs regarding pluricentricity that manifest themselves in these interactions. In this chapter, first, these aforementioned beliefs and interactions are discussed from a quantitative perspective, involving a questionnaire-based research methodology with statistical analysis, while in the next chapter, then, in the name of method triangulation, I will shift to a qualitative approach, which will be based on interviews and qualitative content analysis using coding frames. This kind of mixed-methods orientation in the form of the aforementioned quantitative-qualitative (i.e. questionnaire-based vs. interview-based) duality has been influenced by de Cillia and Ransmayr's (2019) framework, who structured their project in a similar way.

5.1. The methodology of the quantitative segment of the project

The present section discusses the results of a 19-item online questionnaire targeting the classroom interactions and beliefs of learners and teachers of English and/or German, and through them their openness to the pluricentricity of the language in question, using a national sample of 484 students and teachers of English and/or German, including 134 teachers of English, 112 learners of English, 104 teachers of German, and 134 learners of German. The data was collected using a combination of convenience sampling and the snowball technique, i.e. using online and offline language teacher groups, communities, mailing lists, and my own professional contacts.

A factor analysis led to the identification of five distinct factors in the questionnaire survey results. The KMO test was performed with the aim of finding out how suitable the data is for factor analysis in the first place, the result of which (i.e. the KMO index) turned out to be 0.782 (appropriate), suggesting that the variables are indeed suitable for factor analysis (cf. Gie Yong and Pearce, 2013), while the level of significance was considered good ($p < 0.001$), and Bartlett's test of sphericity yielded the following result: $\chi^2 = 1950.607$. The total

explained variance for the five factors together is 53.396%, which is considered acceptable in social sciences (cf. for instance, Izquierdo et al., 2014).

Each factor is associated with statements that refer to the same aspect of the role of pluricentricity in language teaching. Below is a breakdown of what each factor was centred around.

Factor 1: Expectations (explained variance: 21.615%) – This factor focuses on what respondents think characterises a pluricentricity oriented language teaching.

Factor 2: Presence (explained variance: 10.518%) – Items in this factor relate to the extent to which pluricentricity is present in different segments of language teaching.

Factor 3: Interest and awareness (explained variance: 8.937%) – These statements focus on the relationship between language learners' interest in the target language as well as cultural and linguistic awareness on the one hand, and their openness to pluricentricity on the other.

Factor 4: Mixing (explained variance: 6.756%) – This factor relates to respondents' attitudes towards the mixing of varieties in language learning.

Factor 5: Language proficiency level (explained variance: 5.570%) – This factor examines the role of the language proficiency level of the learner in the incorporation of pluricentricity into the language teaching process.

5.2. Discussion of the questionnaire findings

I conducted correlation analyses and t-tests, grouping the responses to the above five factors according to different background variables. This yielded a number of results with varying degrees of significance, related to the following five pivotal topics.

5.2.1. The presence of varieties in the language learning process

The most important finding in this subsection has been that the predominance of the dominant varieties over the non-dominant ones seems to be absolutely clear, so that Hypothesis 3 is certainly supported by these data.

5.2.2. Teachers and learners

The results of a two-tailed t-test comparing teachers' and students' responses allow us to test out Hypothesis 2, i.e. that learners are more open to pluricentricity than teachers, which seems to be confirmed overall, although not for all factors. In terms of thematic distribution, students' openness is much higher than that of the teachers in relation to pluricentric expectations (Factor 1) and the role of students' interest and awareness (Factor 3), while the

opposite is true for pluricentric presence (Factor 2), attitudes to the mixing of variables (Factor 4) and the role of language proficiency (Factor 5). It is important to note that the factors supporting the above hypothesis together account for 30.552% of the explained variance, while the factors showing the opposite result account for only 22.844%, which also tips the scales in favour of the former.

5.2.3. English and German teachers

There are some cases where the results of the English and German subsamples differ to a significant extent, but only for teachers. The findings suggest that English teachers are more open to pluricentricity than their German teaching colleagues. Although there are significant results for only two of the five factors, this is enough to make the overall result significant.

5.2.4. Women and men

Although it is not the main focus of this research, it is worth considering the gender distribution in a quantitative study of this kind. As there is a significant difference for only one of the five factors, it is not worth drawing any firm conclusions, but it may be relevant to mention that for the first factor, men (145 respondents) were significantly more open to pluricentricity than women (366 respondents).

5.2.5. Levels of education, age groups taught

In this context, the results suggest a gradual trend with more and more pluricentric presence as we progress through levels of education as well as age groups, which is in line with Muhr's (1996a) principle of beginner level neutrality, which was discussed earlier, and this means that it can be seen as a positive phenomenon in the light of the relevant sociolinguistic literature. On the other hand, it is also worth noting that, of all levels, the higher and adult education levels show by far the most significant results, indicating a significantly higher degree of openness to pluricentricity than the other levels. In addition to the above-mentioned gradual trend, this can also be explained, among other things, by the gradual increase in the linguistic as well as cultural awareness of students in parallel with the increase in their age (cf. Factor 3), not to mention that those colleagues who teach in higher education are likely to have a closer relationship with teacher training institutions, which are often professionally aware of and even disseminate the theory of pluricentricity.

5.3. Concluding remarks on the quantitative findings

On the whole, the statistical analyses seem to confirm both Hypotheses 2 and 3, since the proportion of responses showing openness to pluricentricity is significantly higher for learners than for teachers (Hypothesis 2), and the hegemony of dominant variables is clear for both subsamples (Hypothesis 3). It is important to note that the higher degree of openness in learners is not confirmed for all factors, but overall it significantly outweighs that of teachers. Among the latter, English teachers show a greater openness to pluricentricity than German teachers, but this may be explained, at least in part, by the different nature of pluricentricity that characterizes the two languages.

6. Teachers' and learners' classroom interactions and beliefs regarding pluricentricity: a qualitative perspective

In order to arrive at a more complete understanding of teachers' and learners' classroom interactions and beliefs on the subject of pluricentricity in the English and German foreign language classroom, I decided to complement the quantitative, questionnaire-based part of the investigation on which the present dissertation is based with a qualitative, interview-based component. This way, through methodological triangulation, the quantitative findings can be completed with important additional insights, thus refining our understanding of the subject considerably. It is important to stress that my aim with the inclusion of the qualitative component has not been to merely find a way to strengthen the claims made in the quantitative section, but rather to extend the scope of this research by introducing a new perspective, thus opening grounds for analysis and interpretation that would otherwise not be possible to include in this investigation.

6.1. The methodology of the qualitative segment of the project

For the qualitative section of this dissertation, I conducted 37 interviews with 21 teachers and 16 students, and one preliminary pilot interview with a teacher. Just like in the case of the questionnaire-based section, the data was collected using a combination of convenience sampling and the snowball technique, i.e. using online and offline language teacher groups, communities, mailing lists and my own professional contacts to find possible participants that were willing to carry out these conversations with me. On average, the interviews lasted about 30 minutes, but the exact length depended greatly on the individual interviewees' attitude and talkativity, with most of the teachers taking a somewhat longer time to interview than the learners.

I designed the interviews in a way that their structure was as similar to that of the questionnaire applied in the quantitative component of the project as possible. I always started the interviews by briefly introducing myself and explaining the topic, which was followed by the actual interview questions in six thematic sections: (1) students' age groups and proficiency levels, (2) the activities used, (3) the characteristics of pluricentric teaching, (4) the role of the teacher, (5) of the learner, and (6) of the materials used in teaching English as a pluricentric language.

Once the interviews were transcribed, read, and re-read in order to maximize the degree of my familiarity with them, I analyzed them using MAXQDA, which is a relatively widely used qualitative data analysis software. I applied Schreier's (2013) framework of qualitative content analysis using coding frames. I outlined the codes of the coding frame in a primarily deductive, concept-driven manner, meaning that I created most of the codes a priori, before the actual analysis, based on the outcomes of the quantitative component of this dissertation, as well as my knowledge of the conversations in the interviews themselves. However, as the coding procedure progressed, I added several further codes and subcodes to the already existing coding frame, based on the tendencies in the interview transcripts that I had failed to recall beforehand, thus complementing the deductive, concept-driven framework with an inductive, data-driven stage (cf. Schreier, 2013), thereby establishing a rather complex coding frame with 12 codes and 21 subcodes, containing 1167 coded segments in total.

Based on the qualitative analysis, it can be stated that an important part of Hypothesis 2 seems to be – at least in part – falsified by the interview findings, as the statement that teachers generally devote little attention to pluricentricity does not seem to hold true for many of the participants. The reality seems to be a lot more complex than that, with a number of counterexamples (i.e. examples of teachers who are indeed extremely mindful of pluricentricity) refining our understanding of the situation. In other words, similarly to de Cillia and Ransmayr's (2019) findings in Austria, many teachers (and learners too) seem to be intuitively sensitive to pluricentricity, even if they do not concentrate on it consciously. This is a highly valuable insight that adds a lot to the interpretation of the questionnaire-based findings, the outcomes of which have verified the second part of the same hypothesis, namely that learners are more open to pluricentricity than teachers. These two – seemingly very different – findings complement each other in a mutually beneficial way in this mixed methods project, demonstrating that triangulation is indeed a useful methodological tool, since

this way, by combining the quantitative approach with the qualitative one, we can recognize connections that would otherwise be overlooked (cf. Yauch and Steudel, 2003).

Furthermore, it is of paramount importance that the participants, without doubt, think of the incorporation of pluricentricity in a way that it is embedded in communication, as part of a general communicative approach to language teaching. This is a very important finding as it proves that this is something that seems to fit in rather neatly with the didactic-methodological tendencies that predominantly characterize the present-day foreign language classroom.

It has also become apparent in almost all of the above themes that the incorporation of pluricentricity into foreign language education is seen as more realistic in the case of English than in the case of German. The recurring observations that the participants have made to the effect that it is already happening in the English classroom, but not so much in the German one, mostly due to the learners' lack of exposure to the German language outside of the school, has very important consequences for German language education.

Finally, a widespread counterargument that is frequently made to downplay the importance and feasibility of pluricentric language teaching has arguably been refuted by the present findings. To be more precise, it seems that – contrary to commonly held belief – one does not have to be a competent user of multiple varieties to be able to incorporate them in his or her teaching, since it is primarily in the receptive skills that these varieties have to be brought to the foreground. This is one of the most groundbreaking realizations that the participants of the present study seem to agree with pro-pluricentricity theoreticians about.

7. Conclusion

This dissertation has attempted to explore in detail the role of linguistic pluricentricity in language teaching, particularly in the case of English and German as foreign languages in Hungary. As a practising teacher of both of these languages in the Hungarian public education system, I have taken an insider's perspective on this topic, incorporating multiple facets of the education system into my investigation. In the name of method triangulation, I have carried out both quantitative and qualitative data collection, with the former encompassing the analysis of the legal–institutional background, including curricula, examination requirements, as well as textbooks, coupled with a quantitative, questionnaire-based component and qualitative, interview-based segment about learners' and teachers' beliefs on the topic.

Of the hypotheses outlined in Chapter 2 above, the first one has been verified completely, proving that there is indeed a considerable need for more pluricentric presence in

curricula, examination requirements, and textbooks alike. In the case of the latter two, some positive cases have been highlighted as inspiring examples to follow in the future, when it comes to the publication of new textbooks and other teaching aids with a more pluricentricity-oriented mindset.

Hypothesis 2, however, has been only partially verified, with the quantitative analysis proving the second part right, providing solid, significant statistical evidence that learners are indeed more open to pluricentricity than teachers, whereas the first part of the hypothesis, i.e. the one about teachers generally devoting little attention to pluricentricity, has been falsified by the qualitative segment, in which a number of counterexamples have been found, i.e. teachers that regard pluricentricity as an important focus of their teaching.

Finally, Hypothesis 3 has been verified multiple times throughout the dissertation, with the predominance of dominant varieties over non-dominant ones being obvious beyond dispute in the case of the legal–institutional background, the questionnaire-based results, and the interview-based findings alike. In the case of English, this means that almost no non-dominant presence can be observed, with pluricentricity being reduced to a sheer British-American dichotomy in the overwhelming majority of the cases. German, of course, is different in this regard, since it is a monodominant pluricentric language, which means that any mention of pluricentricity will at the same time automatically also be a mention of non-dominance. As a result, while in general pluricentricity seems to be less present in the case of German than in English (a recurring observation in many of the interviews), the non-dominant varieties of German are somewhat better represented than those of English. This is, however, simply due to a typological difference between the two languages, with English being a codominant pluricentric language, and German a monodominant one.

As for the relevance of the findings outlined in the present dissertation, it is important to recognize that this project encompasses the entire Hungarian education system with all its levels and constituent parts, thus yielding highly informative results with considerable practical relevance at all these levels and facets of this complex system. Furthermore, it also aims to connect the theoretical background with the practical reality of language teaching in Hungary.

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