

## Speak my Language

A Chapter of My Life - by Kristine Trever

Imagine today if English, Latin, Japanese and any one of the 200 indigenous Australian languages crashed together and became the language of Indiana. That's Hungarian. Like Indiana in the U.S., Hungary is centrally located in Europe and is richly endowed with industry ranging from light bulb manufacturing to precision engineering equipment, agro-business, natural waterways and a solid cultivatable landscape. The soil is so fertile in Hungary that the peaches, nectarines and plums, sold at corner stands run by bickering elderly couples on nearly every block, leave you breathless and teary-eyed. You won't taste fruit like this in at home unless you grow it yourself, and even then, I'm doubtful.

The national Hungarian language is classified and widely referred to as Finno-Ugric. But not without argument for some deep rooted, etymological and problematic racial connotation; Ugric holds both linguistic and genetic meaning, falsely, as many say, implying the construct that the first peoples of Europe were of a different race. The closest possible language is Finnish, but even this is stretching the truth. The linguistic bridge is a fusion that stems from a group of languages in the Uralic

language family, comprising Finnish, Estonian, Hungarian and related dialects and versions. Kathleen Jenks pinpoints the actual birthplace of the Finno-Ugric languages as such

Finnish belongs to the Baltic-Finnic group of the Finno-Ugrian or Uralic language family. It is the largest language in its group, the next largest being Estonian. The Baltic-Finnic language group is one of the westernmost branches of the Finno-Ugrian language family; only the Sámi territory in western and northern Norway extends further west. In the east, the domain of the language family extends to the Yenisey river and the Taimyr peninsula, and the farthest outpost to the south comprises the Hungarians, in the Carpathian basin of Central Europe.<sup>1</sup>

That's geographically diverse, if not spatially confusing. Pull out a world map or your nearest globe, however antiquated and follow with your index finger the lay of the landscape; the massive variety of dialogues and peoples to contribute to this current verbal and written system once vastly spanned from the Ural Mountains to the Baltic Sea, into what we know now as Luxembourg and Macedonia, Transylvania and the Czech Republic. That's nearly the entire continent of Europe. And just as lands were battled for and children were born, the Hungarian language, with its far stretching region of peoples, began developing into its current form at least as far back as some

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.mythinglinks.org/euro~east~finno.html>

three thousand years ago. This distinctive and idiosyncratic language is today spoken by less than ten million people in a country that is now the size of... well...Indiana.

My grandmother's maiden name was Kiraly, like my revered Kingly Patron Saint Istvan Kiraly, whose grotesque phalanges I was fortunate enough to witness. "Kiraly" is pronounced like "Key Rye." The "L" in Kiraly is silent.\* When speaking Hungarian, the accent is always placed on the first syllable, so the "Key" should come out sounding a little shortened. Not "Key" as in a long "Keeeee" sound, but more like "KI."

No matter how long the word, and Hungarian has some convolutedly mouth-twisting long words, or where an accented vowel is placed within a word, the punch of Hungarian comes in fast and hard with your initial verbal annunciation. You've got to nail that first syllable right from the start and repeat the process with every word you'll say. A little comparative analysis to English will clarify. Think of the famous Hungarian actresses, the Gabor sisters - Eva, Magda, ZsaZsa (which I think might be some kind of fancy nickname rendition of Susie). Gabor is both a Hungarian surname as with these gorgeous sisters and Gabor is also a first name for males. In English, we would pronounce Gabor "gaBOR;" in Hungarian we would pronounce it GAbor, with the accent on the GA. I met a Gabor, tall and dark in his white waiters shirt, buttoned

low to reveal his incredible curly chest hair, and fell madly in love with him during his six hour lunch shift at the cafe on the first floor of the Medosz hotel where I lived. It was my 31st birthday. He thanked me for my obscene tip and probably met up with his Hungarian speaking girlfriend, as his English was worse than my Hungarian.

If you, like me, are a first-generation American who did not grow up learning her family's national language, Hungarian is an extraordinarily puzzling language to grasp, let alone master. I chose German as my foreign language elective in high school and university undergrad studies where the choice of enrolling in any obscure Hungarian related courses meant no choice at all. Not a single college or university in the United States offers more than a few cultural studies or humanities courses solely on Hungary. The best you might find is a blanketed "European Studies" course that might cover art, cinema or literature, but language studies feigns little to no results. Now, in my thirties, while working on my PhD, I find that absorbing one more complex set of data proves to be quite antagonistic.

Communication with the my long-lost family in Budapest is just one of the many challenges I face as a family diplomat; not only did I discover my long-lost

cousin Agoston and his family on my quest to find my grandmother's grave in Budapest, I make every effort to keep the lines of communication open between he, myself, my mother and mom's brother Peter. Playing diplomat is a most daunting task. Neither Agoston or I speak each others language, spending time with them required help from my residency advisor Beata or my cousin ZsaZsa, who speaks both English and Hungarian so well that Agoston and I were able to laugh at each others jokes. The use of a translator, however, involves a certain amount of trust and time on my part and the translators part and serves as a kind of cheaters avenue around the language comprehension issue for my cousins and I. As a potential teaching tool, translated versions of written texts serve little purpose. Unlike Romance or latin based languages where a word or phrase may appear and you will be able to decipher certain meanings or know the certainty of words and even sounds; with Hungarian, there's a near-zero recognizability to English. A contrast between the two in their written (typed) forms will illustrate:

English:

I hope you are well and that spring time brings you much sunshine, happiness and warmth! I think of you every day as I write and work on these projects. My heart is often overwhelmed with the joy of knowing that one day soon we will all meet again.

Hungarian:

Remelem mindenki jól van otthon és a tavasz sok napsütést, boldogságot és meleget hoz! Minden nap gondolok rá, hogy ezen a munkán dolgozom. A szívem tele van boldogsággal amikor arra gondolok, hogy egy napon újra tudunk találkozni.

Looking for patterns within the texts to induce meaning or understanding, reveals only a few moments of hope. I find the word ‘gondolok’ repeated in the Hungarian text and a similarity between boldagsagot and boldogsággal, perhaps two tenses of the same verb. My letter in English does not repeat any words (other than the, you, is - what I call baby vocabulary), but I’m feeling positive that “happiness” and “joy” might have been translated each as “gondolok” instead of as two different words that share a likeness in meaning. The double use of “gondolok” for both happiness and joy makes me feel neither. I’m suddenly very paranoid of mediation glitches and semantic robbery, translation disasters and comprehension catastrophe. I’m reminded of Socrates and his phobia of the failures, perhaps even the ruin of humanity, caused by the act of writing things down. Then I remember if it weren’t for Plato keeping written record of Socrates, we’d never know what Socrates “said.” I’m calm again, Plato might oust me from the Republic for being an artist, a copier of form, but he’ll certainly sympathize with my communication dilemma.

The visual representation of the letters that make up the words that can be articulated into sounds actually serve no purpose in interpreting meaning within the texts unless one knows the language, can speak the language. The symbols on the page alone are meaningless without the knowledge of the system that produced them. The shapes of the letters and their arrangement on the page do not act as portals towards meaning and understanding, whatsoever. Not until the words I write to Agoston are sent through a process, the process of translation, will their meaning be accessible.

I want to crash through these communication barriers and theoretical obstacles like a juggernaut, breaking down walls and barriers with an unstoppable force. I practice the 44 letter and digraph integrated alphabet daily, speaking it out loud, often in the shower, attempting to master the sounds of the four different O's and the four different U's, barely grasping the subtlety of their pronunciation. I'm great with the consonants though, and the digraphs, which are letter combinations that produce specific sounds.

For example:

\*"NY" is a digraph with similar sounds to the tilde'd Spanish "n" or the sound of the "ny" in "canyon" or the "nio" in "onion."

Go ahead, say it out loud, it will make more sense. Canyon, Onion, NY. Practice.

\*“LY” is called an historical digraph, in that the “L”, like in Kiraly, is silent.

(\*see above).

\*“DZS” is a trigraph that, contrary to how it appears or how you think it might sound, should be pronounced like “J” as in “judge” rather than the mesh of the sounds of the English letters “dzs.” Avoid saying “dzs” and mentally insert the “J” sound, forever and ever.

Easy, right?

Wrong.

I returned home, reluctantly, from my month-long artists residency in Budapest with little to no lasting grasp of the language. Nearly everyone speaks English though; at least enough to communicate that I needed to buy stamps from the Posta for the 40

postcards I sent, or that I wanted only *these* photos printed *this* way for my gallery exhibition. I spent a lot of time at cafes and pubs and more often the people I met, whether employees or patrons, spoke English effortlessly, likely better than I do. English language studies and fluency have become more and more common throughout Europe, particularly in the cities, but particularly in Hungary, as they prepare for the grand prize of induction into the European Union. Which means the EU better replace all those flags once Hungary earns its star and switches from Forint to Euro.

While I donned and pranced around Budapest in my ex-pat fantasy cap and mooned over the possibilities of applying for dual citizenship, I socialized, formed bonds and made friends with many Hungarians, heightened, I think, because I too am Magyar. Dani, the bicycle nut with rocking calves bartended at the Kiado Kocsma, my corner pub, and spoke the sexiest accented English I have ever heard. I constantly wanted to make out with him and learn his tongue. From the month I spent in the capital, and each night hanging at the Kiado, I'm ashamed to admit I never did make out with Dani, nor did my language skills improve. Falling back on English was the easiest way out of my shell, the most convenient way to flirt with Dani or to flirt with anyone, period. English, my crutch, my comfort zone.

I've retained some random vocabulary words such a "villamusz," which means "tram," a very important word to know to get around the city; and "cipő," which means "shoe" -- also very important for getting around the city and to fit one small niche of my shopping needs. While carefully scouring the city for gifts for friends, language it seems, can play some wily tricks too. I purchased a bottle of Hungarian wine from a fine wine and liquer shop run by two kind women on the less-English speaking side of the spectrum, who smiled and encouraged me to buy this wine. I dropped 4000 forint (the Hungarian currency, about \$20) on a bottle of wine (bor) to bring home to my lover, whomever he may be. Dry, red, the bottle wore a fancy label adorned with an accented version of the word "lover" on it: "lóvér." So sexy! When I returned to the States, I showed my mom the bottle, beaming with glee in anticipation of sharing this romantic gift with a lover and she immediately spit her own wine out in a fit of laughter. "Lóvér" it seems, couldn't be less about love: "ló" means horse and "vér" means blood. I bought a bottle of wine called "horse blood" for my potential lover. Gross. Months later, I stumbled upon the right occasion to share this horse blood wine with a lover, not a "lóvér," at Christmas; the humor of my learning curve not lost in the moment, in fact, it marked the first of many wine toasts in our passionate affair.

Though the name a misnomer, the wine was savory and delicious; exploding with ripe berries and ancestral earthiness, not sweet, not a hint of blood flavor. Hungary is quite fond of and proud of its wineries, including the famous “Bulls Blood,” who flows faster than the Duna. But Hungarians are even more fond and proud of the wicked wit that comes through their speech. Full of colorful insults like “Baszd szajba a vacogos capat!” (slap the chattering shark in your mouth) and “Rosseb egye meg!” (may you be eaten alive by a festering wound)<sup>2</sup>, my cute wine blunder seems moot. Like any foreign language, the rules of grammar, syntax and cultural idioms are real and legitimate concerns and can force you unknowingly into a den of troublesome or embarrassing situations. For instance, the mispronunciation of “Egészségedre,” which means “Cheers” or “To Your Health,” when spoken fast or drunk or with any syllables slurred in any way, sounds awfully similar to the same word for “up your ass” (Seggedbe).

I have struggled with speaking, learning and being Hungarian since as far back as I can reach back. I can reach back to about age three. I think this is because the language really is like no other language on Earth and because we never spoke or

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.insultmonger.com/swearing/hungarian.htm>

learned Hungarian as children. This is not a hyperbolic statement to cover up my ineptitude at learning new languages, this is a common assessment, one that even my Hungarian tutor Brigitta fixates on as she teaches both me and her eight year old son how to count to ten. He's lucky to learn Hungarian alongside his studies of English and his vocabulary is fantastic. As a little kid, the snippets of Hungarian I came near were so foreign that they never stuck with me, not unlike today's mental block when it comes to adapting my brain around the language. When I did hear my mother's curses as a child, they were more like gobble-de-gook than anything else. They sounded ridiculous, hilarious, like a record played backward. And while I had no idea what she was saying, it was her tone and the plates she threw at my father that sent us running out of the house, keenly aware that the same words softly spoken might manifest themselves in an entirely different way. Like when I coo into my 20 pound cat Jupiter's ear, "you stinky fat pig" and he purrs and purrs as if I'm telling him I love him.

The beginnings of my failed understanding of Hungarian happened nearly every Christmas of mine and my sisters lives until my parents divorced when I was eight. Each year, mom would write the handmade tags for our presents out in code

words, each corresponding to the ranks of our birth. First, Second, Third, Fourth.

Kira. Kimberly. Kristine. Katherine. Yearly, we'd each forgot which one we were. I mean, I knew I was her THIRD child KRISTINE, but I could not remember the difficult and confusing Hungarian word that sounded nothing like anything I'd ever heard or could pronounce and it was the same for all sisters. A deviant language, indeed, and anya (mom) knew how to make it work against her deviant, present-peeking daughters.

First = első

Second = második

Third = harmadik

Fourth = negyedik

One, two, three, four. Kick start your favorite Ramones song here, only in Hungarian.

I think it actually sounds more punk! And though now I love the sound and value the familial placement and meaning of the word "harmadik," which is phonetically close and only a consonant off from to harmony, I always wanted to be "első."

My mother speaks Hungarian okay, knows her swear words and some vocabulary, she's got pronunciation down despite the fact there isn't a trace of accent to her English. Unless you count the midwest twang of being raised in Ohio and living in Michigan for 40 years, which has a pretty distinct regional intonation, the mark of Hungarian annunciation and nuance is all but nonexistent. She does not speak Hungarian fluently as she was younger than eight years old when her family fled the country, the same age as when my parents fled each other. Mom has a basic understanding of the rules of the language and has taught me a few snippets since I've embarked on this project. Like yes and no - igen and nem - such basic but fundamentally critical words to know in any situation. But a second-grade education in Hungary, for a sixty-year old woman, feels like a million years ago, she tells me. Emigrating to the U.S., she and my Grandfather spoke in Hungarian frequently, but the pressure to learn English and be an AMERICAN were greater than the desires or abilities to hold on to their native voice.

In the midst of all these language and translation struggles, indeed struggles of power, communication and meaning, the pressure to learn more complicated words, Words, WORDS, (I say this like Norma Desmond in Sunset Boulevard), I've made a radical change in my Facebook page and you can too: scroll all the way down to the

bottom of your Facebook profile, click English, then click Magyar in the dialogue box that opens up. Your posts and comments, *igen*, anything written in English will stay in English, but the blue linking Facebook options will switch to the language of your choice. Such as the “What are you doing now?” status update section (Mi jár a fejedben?), photo or status comments (Hozzászólok), likes/ dislikes (Tetszik/Nem tetszik) and friend requests (személy ismerősnek jelölt). While not comprehensively designed to cover any of the 200 indigenous Australian languages; there’s over 40 language choices on Facebook. There’s even a new beta version of “English pirate,” which is ridiculous and funny for all of one minute. But for now, perhaps for good, it’s Magyar all the way for this desperate Hungarian princess.

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