

Peter Hamvay's interview with István Kenesei, Director of RIL MTA, for the Hungarian weekly *Magyar Narancs* (unabridged text)

What gap is the institute intended to fill? Of the tasks that the decree assigns to the new institute are there any that the Academy of Sciences or university departments has been unable to carry out?

*As I see it, the government has set up an advisory body, which it is perfectly entitled to do. Moreover, in Section 3 of the decree, the body is referred to as an "office", which is unusual in the case of university departments or research institutes. Since it is obviously a governmental institution, it falls under Article X of the Constitution (Fundamental Law): "The State shall have no right to decide on questions of scientific truth; only scientists shall have the right to evaluate scientific research." And scientists are to be found in the public bodies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Now, as far as I know, none of the relevant committees or sections of the Academy have been consulted in this matter, from which I deduce that the new institute will not be concerned with research.*

Is there a need for it? What kind of language strategy is called for?

*Even the name of the institute is curious. From the rules of Hungarian orthography it would seem that this institute will have to deal with general issues of language strategy from Hungarian point of view. But the duties listed are limited to dealing with strategy for the Hungarian language, so it should really have been called "Institute for Hungarian Language Strategy." It should be noted, however, that there is no such thing as a "general language strategy".*

*The fundamental problems of Hungarian language planning were for the most part tackled in the early 19th century, during the period of language rejuvenation in the Age of Reform, when the Hungarian language needed to be standardized and protected from the influx of German and Latin words. The Hungarian language is endangered only in communities outside the borders of Hungary, where language planning is indeed called for, but the institutions confronting these problems in the neighbouring countries were not contacted either, it seems, and are entirely ignored in the decree. The examples mentioned in the decree are also wholly misguided. The Finnish language strategy, for one, is concerned with the status and 'cohabitation' of the two official languages of the country, Finnish and Swedish, and with the country's minority languages, such as Saami. In Hungary the issue of the official language is quite different, and although there are also a number of minority languages here, these are again left unmentioned in the decree. In other words, the institute will deal not with the issues of language strategy in Hungary but only with a language strategy for Hungarian. So its name is misleading in this respect, too.*

*I must add here that for one kind of language planning in Hungary there is certainly a great need: that for Hungarian Sign Language, and a project to provide a description and standardization of HSL has just been launched at RIL. But, again, there is no reference to this in the list of tasks for the new institute.*

Will it have a beneficial effect if the institute provides expert opinion for public administration and the media, and if it elaborates the linguistic basis of the new programme for general education textbooks for the Hungarian language?

*These are two very different tasks. As I have said, the government has the right to establish, and may need to seek the advice of, such institutions. If they think that the language of laws and decrees is not consistent, clear or straightforward enough for the public to understand, and it is necessary to establish a government office to remedy this, so be it, although existing departments of Hungarian linguistics at universities can do this job inexpensively, and RIL has been doing it free of charge for quite some time. It may be important to have professional speakers in the public media who can articulate better, but committees already exist for this purpose, if I am not mistaken.*

*As for the textbook programme, this should be the prerogative of linguists, educationists and practising teachers, as has frequently been the case in the past. Indeed, several members of RIL's staff have contributed to such projects before, though they are not within the remit of our general research programme.*

How can the institute “maintain the richness of the language”?

*In short, this phrase is unintelligible.*

Is there a need for the formulation of principles of supporting Hungarian-language databases and their coordination in the area of information technology?

*For some twenty years now several universities, research institutes of the Academy, and private enterprises have collaborated in this field of research with considerable success, as has been acknowledged by the National Office of Innovation and its predecessors. I can't see what gap the new institute could fill here, except in terms of financing further research, or the (long overdue) payment of national membership fees.*

What do you think about “further tasks to counter the devalorisation of the Hungarian language”?

*I can't see how it is possible for a task to counter anything. Linguistic value, if there is such a thing, needs first be determined, then devalorisation should be demonstrated through proper research, so that we may know what are we supposed to be fighting against. Clearly, inefficient and inexact formulations are a prime target, as this very example demonstrates so well.*