

Participatory research and sociolinguistics: A critical approach to intersecting language ideologies

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Overview

- What is participatory sociolinguistics?
- How is it related to the participants heterogeneous language ideologies?
- Two case studies
 - Sociolinguistic nostalgia or belonging?
 - Belonging to a minority with or without a minority language?

What is participatory research?

- research based on the involvement and engagement of as many stakeholders as possible
- with a critical view to the quality or level of participation, including the participation of those usually called “researchers”

What is participatory sociolinguistics?

- Interpreting the linguistic expertise of research participants in a non-hierarchical relationship and subverting the mainstream practice of assigning separate roles to the "researcher" and the "informant"
- Mutual involvement and engagement of the widest possible range of participants who address the language-related research issues, either as part of their everyday lives or as part of their academic careers
- In the social sciences, researchers redefine their own privileged position, inter alia with the promise that breaking down the hierarchy helps democratise the process of knowledge production and address the legitimacy crisis of science in current societies (Jung et al 2014)
- Sociolinguistic research adds a further aspect to this, focusing on the relationship between the object of linguistic research and language ideologies

But how?

- Despite the rise of participatory linguistic approaches (e.g. Rodríguez Louro et al. 2021; Storto 2022), little research on how these approaches can be linked to critical sociolinguistics (but see Jaspers & Meeuwis, 2013; Li et al. 2020)
- Critical sociolinguistics celebrates fluid language practices described as translanguaging, heteroglossia, and superdiversity, whereas stakeholders still often stigmatize these practices (Spolsky 2021: 41)
- A participatory approach in critical sociolinguistics is possible when heterogeneity of the participants' language ideologies becomes the focus of research, and participants adjust their ideologies to each other through participatory practices

On language ideologies

- Language ideology research addresses positioned and partial visions of language in the world, including the power relations they re-construct and maintain (Gal & Irvine 2019)
- Not primarily the description of ideas that is significant in understanding the dynamics of power, but rather the processes of what Gal and Irvine call "ideologizing" or "ideological work"
- The everyday practices of language are imbued with this work, construing and organizing sociolinguistic differentiation: "researchers are not exempt from ideologies of language. We all do ideological work" (Irvine 2021: 232)
- The academic separation between the "researcher" and the "informant" is worth re-examining in sociolinguistic research, as all participants do ideologizing work that establishes the perspective from which they view language

Language ideologies meet participatory research

- How can this ideological work be reconciled in research that is participatory?
- Critical sociolinguists seek ways to face the challenges posed by the differences between the participants' ideologies:
 - several scholars warn us not to dismiss essentialized views on language, even if they can be omitted for a nuanced and adequate scholarly description (Jaspers & Madsen 2016; Wee 2016)
 - Albury (2017) argues that in order to understand local epistemologies it is essential to include speaker perspectives not akin to the approach of critical scholarship
- Essentializing views subjected to ideologizing work of everyday practices
 - Language ideologies, including those related to named and „standard“ languages, are contested and in constant flux
 - Participatory research thus not only embraces the essentialized views of participants, but also critically relates to them in acts of mutual involvement and engagement

Research question

- How can language-related research be made participatory through joint ideologizing work, when the participants' language ideologies are heterogeneous?

Empirical analysis

- Two case studies from a research project, centred around understanding the language practices of stakeholders in a language revitalization programme
- The participants' (including academic researchers) joint ideologizing work (Gal & Irvine 2019) and their well-established ideas about language and linguistic practice

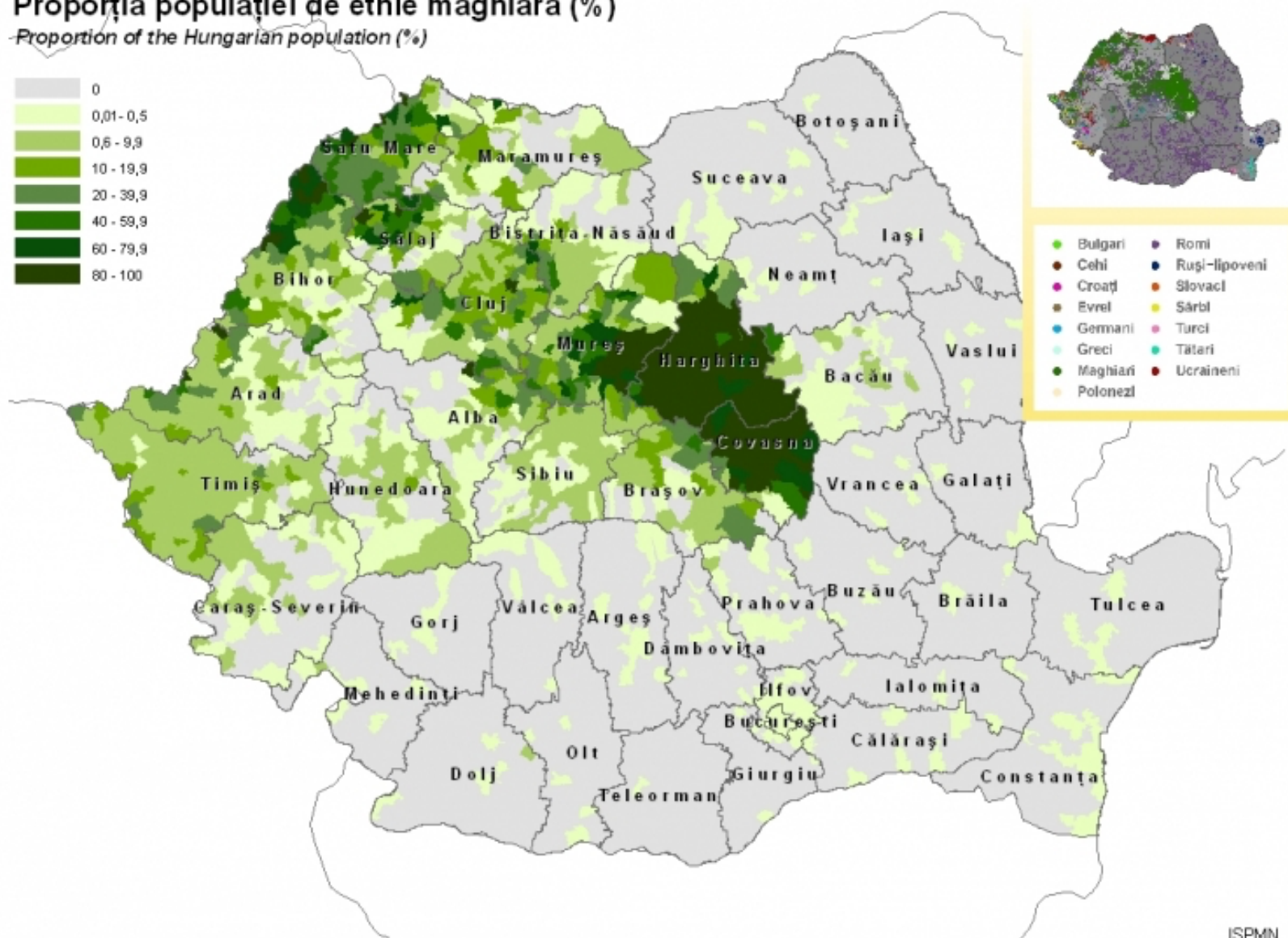
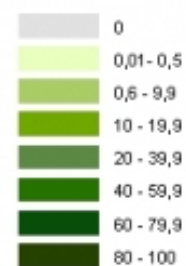
The context

- Multilingual practices of the linguistic and religious minority called the Csángó or Ceangăi in North-East Romanian Moldavia
- Research among those who are stakeholders of the Moldavian Csángó Hungarian Educational Programme
- Revitalisation of the Csángó Hungarian language



Proporția populației de etnie maghiară (%)

Proportion of the Hungarian population (%)



The Csángó as a contested language

- Two nationalizing and thus conflicting interpretations of the Csángó language (see Cotoi 2013; Davies 2019):
 - one linking local language practices to Hungarian
 - the other emphasizing their uniqueness and their differences from Standard Hungarian

Csángó as a Hungarian dialect

- The idea of being part of the Hungarian imagined nation is upheld by the Hungarian-minded actors in Hungary and in Transylvania
- Moldavia is understood as a peripheral region of the Hungarian language where members of the adult and senior generations speak in a way that is seen as archaic and considered valuable
- Hungarian language revitalization in Moldavia dominated by the endangered nature of this linguistic “relic”, and linked at the same time to the modernist idea of teaching Standard Hungarian in the Moldavian Csángó Hungarian Educational Programme since 2000
- Standard Hungarian as the cornerstone of the Hungarian national community

Csángó as a “mixed” language

- Mainstream Romanian perspective in Moldavia mostly represented by politicians and academics, as well as by the Roman Catholic Church:
 - Csángó does not belong either to Hungarian, or to Romanian, it is a mixed language, and its status as an autonomous language is speculative (see Tánczos 2011)
- The tension between the two approaches manifested itself in political debate surrounding the official recognition of the language educational programme in the early 2000s (Vincze 2008), but it also had a wider impact on the lives of the multilingual Moldavian people (Cotoi 2013, Şerban 2021)

Local understandings and participatory research

- Local metalinguistic practice naming the vernacular as the "Csángó way of speaking" emerged to deal with the tensions between the two types of nationalism
- Local discourses do not assign relevance to whether Csángó is a "dialect" of Hungarian or a language in its own right (Bodó et al. 2017).
- Any participatory research that focuses on language cannot avoid the conflicts that arise from such differences in local and non-local metalinguistic perspectives and categorisations

Fieldwork and methods of analysis

- Together with stakeholders of Moldavian language revitalization, we have conducted two research projects designed according to the same principle of critically informed involvement and engagement of all parties through participation in as many stages of the research as possible
- The analysis focuses on the metadiscourses formulated during the projects
 - Reflexive moments, where the participants' language ideologizing work interacted with each other: either confronting or reinforcing particular ideologies of language
 - This method is akin to moment analysis, which Li (2011: 1224) describes as “a paradigm shift, away from frequency and regularity oriented, pattern-seeking approaches to a focus on spontaneous, impromptu, and momentary actions and performances of the individual”
 - The reflexive moments differ from Li's description: they do not necessarily occur in the interaction, but can also evolve later, even after leaving the project meetings
 - The inherent reflexivity and the sustainable cyclicity of participatory research lead to an extension of moment analysis that makes specific momentary actions within the research process itself the object of analysis

The Csercsetare projects: Participants 1

- **Accompanying researchers**

- Research participants are socio-political actors with a reflexive and interpretive perspective on their own life-worlds (Bucholtz et al. 2016). They do not need to be empowered, but to be accompanied through their research journey
- In our study, they were all interested in Hungarian language revitalization from a critical sociolinguistic, ethnographic or participatory perspective, having diverse scholarly training in the social sciences, various presuppositions about the Moldavian life-worlds and a wide range of fieldwork experience among the Moldavian Csángós
- Their task was to create a communicative arena that was intended to support involvement and engagement in the discussions that generated the data for this study

The Csercsetare projects: Participants 2

- **Mediator researchers**

- They were recruited from previous research projects
- Both of them are conducting PhD research about their own Csángó communities
- They organized two groups of invited participants in Moldavian villages where they had grown up

The Csercsetare projects: Participants 3

- **Invited participants**

- Involved in language revitalization activities in different ways
 - e.g. former students who attended “Hungarian lessons” during their school years, parents of such students, participants in Hungarian classes for adults and activists working in the programme
- One mediator researcher recruited invited participants by casting and conducting short interviews with them, the other asked her childhood friends to take part in a project

Project events

- Preparatory sessions
 - the accompanying and mediator researchers discussed a number of issues, including the concept of research, how to get by in life, or the issue of Moldavian intellectuals
- Project meetings
 - The collaboration was designed as a project of 3-5 meetings resulting in a tangible product.
- The researchers decided to use the terms “project” and “product” instead of research and research results, creating a familiar and safe space for the invited participants and serving the goal to democratize the practice of research by making the terminology of the collaboration more accessible

Case study 1: “Therapy for the soul” – Sociolinguistic authenticity or nostalgia?

- The mediator researcher about the invited participants:
 - “For long I have been eager to know how the age group of my parents, or in general those in their 40s, who still communicated in Hungarian in their childhood, see things, how they live their lives, what their relationship to the Hungarian language is, what they pass on to their children from their Csángóness and how migration has influenced their identity. Do they have a sense of identity, and if they do, how do they categorize themselves? [...] My goal was to explore ourselves a bit: where do we belong? What connects us? How do Csángó Hungarian parents think in the twenty-first century?”
- The invited participants:
 - they were chosen from the age group who were still raised in Hungarian. In this village, the adults most often use Hungarian in local interactions with other adults, especially in the older generations. The younger generation still acquires at least a passive or receptive knowledge of Hungarian through listening to their parents
- The accompanying researchers:
 - they work at universities, with various experiences of doing fieldwork in Moldavian Csángó villages

Project events

- The meetings were called “online *guzsalyas*” (gatherings for spinning)
- The accompanying researcher noticed that during the first conversation “something deep and timeless happened, we spoke and listened to each other” (fieldwork diary, 2020)
- Hungarian was presented as a self-evident choice in the fieldwork notes of the mediator researcher: “I noticed that the participants' words came from the depth of their heart. Often expressed in the local way, often striving for the ‘clean Hungarian’ speech”
- The choice to use Hungarian created a “nostalgic” (Bucholtz 2003) community discourse and experience: both the mediator and accompanying researcher mention deep “expressions” and emotional “words” as important parts of creating this community



Topics of discussion

- The discussion took the interactional format of a peer round, where everyone was asked the same question, which was to be answered by a “story”
 - E.g. when the mediating researcher asked the invited participants whether they were prepared for the meeting, Alina answered: *"we will say things as they come from our heart to our mouth"*
 - Mária summarized the invited participants' view of the discussions as follows: *"We could tell stories till morning. You tell one and another comes to my mind, that is so much of a therapy, that is, I would call this therapy, therapy for the soul"*
- The invited participants formulated critical perspectives answering questions on authenticity in today's world. In their opinion, the idyllic village life no longer exists: people do not care about each other, and the old traditions – with the exception of mourning the dead – are no longer practiced

Topic: family gathering

- Laura first explained in detail how they came together at her grandmother's place. Then she contemplated how this tradition has died out:
 - Laura: "Then everyone stuffed the chickens at home, we gathered at my grandmother's house, then she cooked a big, big, big *málé* (corn polenta), a huge *málé*, because we were so many, and there were pancakes, there was wine, and wine again, and this was such a good example for us children, because the family was together. Well, since 2000, when everyone has their own families, unfortunately this tradition no longer exists, after all, because with my sister we meet once a year and we can no longer carry on this tradition. But I would have liked to pass this on to the children, because I felt that the family was united. Well, we are still united, but this was left behind, somehow this no longer gets done"
- This story structure seems rather general: remembering past traditions is always positive and emotional, also somewhat overwhelming

Sociolinguistic nostalgia or authenticity?

- As ideologizing work, strategic essentialism (Bucholtz 2003: 401) was introduced and initiated by the mediator and accompanying researchers, and it was performed by the invited participants, who could thus legitimize and give value to their local identities and shared past in the Csángó village
- The essentialism as an ideologizing practice of authentication was not without critique from any of the participants, who contrasted their nostalgic stories about the past with present-day realities, recognizing that they had limited meaning in the present or foreseeable future

Case study 2: Belonging to a minority with or without speaking the minority language

- The mediator researcher:
 - PhD student in Dance Anthropology, working for the organization running the Moldavian Csángó Hungarian Educational Programme and engaged in organizing cultural events
 - “A pierced, vegan, non-religious Csángó”, who “does not match the image of the ‘typical’ Csángó woman we can see on book covers” (accompanying researcher’s fieldnotes, October 2020)
 - She has been determined to explore and present the complexities of what being a young and Romanian-speaking Csángó means in the 21st century
- Invited participants:
 - They were women in their 20s with university degrees, childhood friends who used to attend Hungarian language classes together with the mediator researcher, but who are now living outside their native village
- Accompanying researchers:
 - Romanian-speaking Hungarian researchers from the Transylvanian (Western) region of Romania and Hungary

The project events

- The mediator researcher invited “Romanian-speaking” participants as an act of symbolic resistance against the Hungarian language hegemony of the “Csángó research” and the cultural and linguistic appropriation of the Csángós by powerful external actors such as the Hungarian government
- She explained her decision to invite Romanian speakers as follows: “because they represent a huge part of our culture, and it would be a pity if all the valuable information they possess were to be lost simply because they are not fluent in Hungarian” (mediator researcher’s fieldnotes, November 2020)
- The mediator researcher’s ideologizing work determined the language of the core project meetings, i.e., they were held in Romanian, and only the reflection sessions between the accompanying researchers and the mediator researcher were held in Hungarian

The product

- A series of “Csángó memes” reflecting on the participants’ shared life experiences, connected mostly to their childhood, while also taking a critical stance, as they (re)interpret these early memories in the light of their adult knowledge
- Memes are a metamodern genre and a form of collective response to social and cultural phenomena (Varis & Blommaert, 2015). As discursive units, they are a form of ideological practice since they imply a certain degree of critique (Wiggins 2019)
- The memes created within the project address topics such as the participants’ relation to their mothers, religion, traditions, food, alcoholism, sexual education, domestic violence, and feminism

When your mom hears
that your boyfriend
goes to church



Nu o sun duminica, sa nu ma întrebe
de ce nu merg la biserica.



**Kid being raised in
a Christian
household thinking
pre-marital sex is
bad**



**Realising his
birthday is 8
months after
his parents
marriage date**



AZ A SZÉP, AKINEK A SZEME KÉK



Shared and not shared experiences

- Mediator Researcher (MR): I've never talked about these before, but I didn't go to high school in Bacău like you guys did. But I had the same experience in another county in the opposite direction: **that we are Romanians and we came here**, that I don't know what, lalala. And I didn't know, I really didn't.
- Invited participant (IP) 3: Laughs.
- MR: Yes, I really did not hear about this, ever, **we never talked about this**, and I find it super interesting that these things are discussed here as well.
- IP1: Yes, more in high school, so in college people don't look at you anymore, they don't ask you where you're from, what you are. **In high school there was prejudice** like that in the beginning, you know, that oh, you are from [anonymized names of Csángó villages], **all you Csángós**. In my case, in my class at least, **most of us were Catholics**, I mean, we all were Catholics, mostly Csángós. And there were very few people from the town and they said that **"I got into a class of Bozgors"**, you all know for sure/
- IP2: Laughs.
- IP1: I'm sure we had such classmates, some of them even transferred because they didn't like being with us.
- IP4: I didn't know.
- MR: Really?

Shared and not shared experiences 2

- IP1: I don't know if it was for that reason necessarily, but there were about four or five of them **from the city who got along well**, and then one of them left and the other one left too. Yeah, two boys. Although [...] They were more comfortable **in the classes where everyone was from the city, all Orthodox and more badass**. But **we, those from the rural areas, from these villages, we kept to ourselves, we were well-behaved, we didn't care about laughing in the hall**, let's... at least my class, that's what I said, we were mostly Csángós, let's say, we were all from [anonymized names of Csángó villages] and all sorts of villages like that. Many, many of us. I mean almost all of us. It wasn't a problem for me, I was the other way around

Reflections of an accompanying researcher from the Transylvanian region of Romania

- “One of the defining ideological constructs of **being part of the Hungarian minority in Transylvania is survival**: the sacred task of **preserving the mother tongue and the Hungarian identity** (and everything that it entails), the sense of **pride and superiority over the majority society** that comes from the Hungarian identity (see the neatly lined-up families waiting for the consecration of their Easter baskets in Csíkszereda, the garbage-free hillside after the Pentecost Pilgrimage of Csíksomlyó, etc.), **the rejection and stigmatization of 'mixing'** (whether linguistic or ethnic): 'whoever chooses a Romanian spouse is a traitor', 'whoever sends their child to a Romanian kindergarten/school is a weak person', 'whoever continues their studies in Romanian is lost to the Hungarian community'. [...]
- **Ambivalent feelings about discrimination** also play a significant role (in my personal experience) in this: the minority Hungarian from Transylvania assumes discrimination in all situations by authorities/institutions/foreign citizens/'the imaginary Romanian', but at the same time this **discrimination** (perceived or in many cases real - well, I am a minority Hungarian from Transylvania myself) **catalyses/energises the struggle for survival**, makes the task even more noble, makes the person who takes part in it an even better person

- “From this ideological perspective, **the perception of Moldavian Hungarians who ‘choose’ to speak Romanian is not complicated: they are lost, they are assimilated, they are gone.** The young people studying in Romanian in Bacău also reported (negative) **discrimination** by the majority based on ethnic, religious or even linguistic practices. What became clear to me is that the process of **assimilation** is not as simple as the metaphor of ‘assimilation’ would suggest: being considered lost by one community does not mean that one will be accepted by another community and will not experience situations in which one’s own otherness is reflected upon by those one is supposed to be assimilated into”

How do language ideologies intersect in these discussions?

- The accompanying and the mediator researchers created a safe space for the invited participants where their life experiences related to being a Romanian-speaking Csángó were shared in multimodal ways
- It became possible that the invited participants referred to their stigmatization when arriving in a Romanian-speaking urban environment of another religion and discussed their understanding and personal political agendas concerning being a minority
- Given the different positionalities of the participants, these agendas are divergent and no synergy was achieved between the language ideologies of Moldavian and Transylvanian minority speakers
- The common ideological work can begin when the different experiences of sociolinguistic differentiation are interpreted in a common space, and participants jointly reflect on the lived experiences of belonging to the Csángó and Hungarian minorities

Discussion

- The two case studies indicate that significantly different ways of involvement and engagement can be achieved during a sociolinguistic project, depending on the extent to which participants cooperate in language ideological work
 - Case study 1: practicing strategic essentialism, the participants jointly constructed sociolinguistic belonging to, and nostalgia for past lived experiences
 - Case study 2: participants' different positions towards the shifting axes of differentiation between being a linguistic minority or majority were not salient during the project meetings
- From a critical perspective, the decisive aspect of both case studies is how the language ideological work is reflected and how the similarities and differences arising from the positionalities of the participants are connected or in conflict with each other

Is a participatory sociolinguistics possible?

- It is possible, when the research highlights the heterogeneity of all participants' linguistic ideologies and participants seek to accommodate their own ideologies in critical ways through common acts of reflective participatory practices
- Some limitations:
 - the language ideologies of some participants determine the implementation of the project to such an extent that there is little or no room for the emergence of different voices: in both case studies the mediator researcher selected participants so that the linguistic diversity of the stakeholders was not targeted, thus creating a relatively monolingual group
 - the cooperation of the participants created a common and implicitly constructed ideological platform during the discussions by narrating lived experiences of a vanishing local Hungarian world around them (case study 1) and of different understandings of what it means to belong to a minority with or without speaking the minority language (case study 2)
 - both projects pointed out that the accompanying researchers' language ideological perspectives were unclear to the other participants and could not easily be integrated into the ideological agenda they were trying to achieve

Conclusions

- If critical linguistic reflection does not become an integral part of the joint activities, there is a risk that participants will not recognise the difference between their own and others' sociolinguistic positions and thus will not seek to do ideologizing work in understanding and managing these differences
- Whatever the outcome of such work might be, it is a condition of participation for anyone who wants to engage in sociolinguistic research for social change
- Participatory sociolinguistics makes a difference through the involvement and engagement of stakeholders by transforming the ways we have access to linguistic knowledge that matters in our life

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For further Csángó memes and online *guzsalyas* please visit

<http://parsol.net>