

PILVAX

Issue Four Winter 2007

Susanna Lippóczy Rich is Professor of English and Distinguished Teacher at Kean University, New Jersey. In 2005, she became the first recipient of joint Fulbright and Collegium Budapest Fellowships in Creative Writing. “Hungarian is Hungarian is” is one of six published chapters in *Still Hungary: A Memoir*, a collection which includes prize-winning work cited in *The Best American Essays: 2004*. The author gratefully acknowledges the Fulbright Council for International Exchange of Scholars, Collegium Budapest, the American Hungarian Educators’ Association, the Passaic American Hungarian Museum, and Kean University for its resources and support of her project.

Hungarian Is Hungarian Is: The Backward and Inside Out
by Susanna Lippóczy Rich

Human beings...are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society...the “real world” is to a large extent built up on the language habits of the group.

—Edward Sapir,

The Status of Linguistics as a Science

Strange I am—always been. First generation Hungarian-American, I funny-spoke. When, at fi ve, I started to babble in English, my Hungarian accent was so thick that even mousy Sister Helen Michael laughed at me. I funnyate. Instead of fragile peanut butter sandwiches bleeding guess-what-it-looks-like shapes in purple jelly, I had rough-cut rye with chicken fat and garlicky salami (which in turn made me funnysmell).

I funny-dressed. For cold weather my grandmother sleeved my legs in the arms of her sweater and buttoned the rest around me in a droopy cross between long johns and a dhoti. I’m still a devotee of *The Addams Family* and *The Munsters* because, well, They ‘R’ Me; I sit on my office floor with adult students; I teach almost exclusively by inductive methods; I love Gertrude Stein; and I won’t eat anything wheat. It’s mixed—both freedom and dissonance—all that—and not knowing exactly what makes me strange.

Perhaps I’m suffering from the necessarily thwarted yearning of all humans to belong. Perhaps my subtle but distinct sense of alienation is peculiar to all first-generation Americans. But it was not for goulash-paprika-Béla-Lugosi-csárdás kitsch that I visited

Hungary where centuries of my ancestors were born and lived. I went to understand the deeper emotional and cognitive habits of my two countries—America, currently the richest country on earth, in counterpoint to Hungary, a country that has had to rise, over and over, like the mythic Phoenix, from millennia of political, geographical, cultural, and linguistic upheavals. I would explore, as Stein wrote she had in a most relevant text—The Gradual Making of The Making of the Americans:

I then began again to think about the bottom nature in people, I began to get enormously interested in hearing how everybody said the same thing over and over again with infinite variations but over and over again until finally if you listened with great intensity you could hear it rise and fall and tell all that that there was inside them, not so much by the actual words they said or the thoughts they had but the movement of their thoughts and words endlessly the same and endlessly different. (243)

I would listen for this undercurrent—this movement of thoughts and words endlessly the same and endlessly different. What I found lends credence to the Sapir-Whorf Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis—that our sense of reality is determined by our linguistic habits. I surfaced from jet lag to be astounded by the nature of the forces that conflict in me.

What seems to endlessly repeat in Hungary, is that—from the simplest to the most complex—it's all inside out, upside down, and backwards to the English-speaking world: family name precedes the given; women attach the né to their husband's names instead of their maiden, even though né means born as; cut flowers are carried head down, and they're sold in odd numbers instead of even. Hungarian ambulances pierce the air with a high note and whine to a bass—school children refer to this sound as the nay-noo of ambulances (the rhythm being underscored by the fact that ai is a high frequency vowel and oo the lowest sound frequency)—as contrasted to the ascending weeee of American ambulances. There's the descending chiming in a minor key to which metro and trolley doors close; the stomp/skip rhythms of the csárdás as compared to slam-footed skip/stomp of American clogging; the descending cadences and pervasive mood of the minor key of Hungarian folksongs, which, after all, is the use of the musical flat, the half step down, as opposed to the sharp, the half step up; even the Hungarian rigo bird sings in descending tones whereas its cousin, the American robin, seems to laugh merrily. And the name of one of the major bus manufacturers in Hungary is called Ikarusz, who, unfortunately, rose high, only to plummet into the sea.

There's more. In *A Country Full of Aliens*, British journalist Colin Swatridge notes that Hungarian light switches have to be flipped up to turn off; that Hungarians say "Hello" when they're bidding farewell; plastic sleeves receive papers from the top with punchholes on the left in England—in Hungary they are inserted from the bottom; the year is placed at the end of a date in England, at the beginning in Hungary; Hungarians do long division right to left, and multiplication from left to right—the opposite of American/English ciphering. And so on. Naturally, any such remarks smack of provincialism, but it's true that in Hungary life is organized differently, often in opposition to countries where English is the dominant language. And Hungarians were

the first to notice the difference, themselves: Swatridge's title is in repartée with Hungarian George Mikes's original tweak at British life, *How to Be an Alien*. No wonder Hungarians are so good at inventing that which untwists, such as the Ernő Rubik's Cube, or János Bolyai's non-Euclidean geometry. And how about the Hollywood of Fox, Zukor, Paul Newman, Tony Curtis, Lugosi, and the Gabor sisters—to name a few? So talented are Hungarians in the business of illusion—showing what isn't as if it were—that the MGM commissary has an ironic disclaimer posted on the wall: “Just because you're Hungarian doesn't mean you're a genius.” Genius, wrote William James in *The Principles of Psychology*, “means little more than the faculty of perceiving in an inhabitual way” (19). If you come from a country that does things upside down and backward, that comes more naturally.

Ludwig Wittgenstein was right, Imagine a language and you imagine a way of life, for the Hungarian language both embodies and drives these differences: in Géza Balázs's words from *The Story of Hungarian: A Guide to the Language*, “In the Hungarian Language everything is reversed” (29). As Balázs points out, “in Hungarian the individual words are generally extended to the right, using a number of suffixes... while the Indo-European languages work backward from a word, or are left-tending”; there is a large number of palindromes in Hungarian (all that coming and going from two directions, like the changing of the tides); and Hungarian often uses the periodic sentence structure, placing verbs at ends of clauses. Syntactical constructs are fairly obvious. What surprised me most was something subtler than grammatical structures—something more pervasive that would have delighted Stein—rhythm.

English gallops happy on the tongue—ta Tum, ta Tum, ta Tum—unstressed/stressed syllables most often start phrases on the downbeat, end on the up. A sample of individual words will do: increase, reward, omnipotent. More importantly, English is rich with prepositions and articles and the infinitive to that form stepping stones to the more important nouns and verbs where the stress will land, as in the tree, in fact, she left, to be. And English tends to stress verbs—words of being and action. Verbs follow subjects, so, again, the stronger word, the upbeat, is always coming. Claimed to mimic the heart, in poetics this rhythm is called the iamb. A homonym of I am, even the name of the beat is assertive, confident. Tending upward, anticipating increased strength—the recoil before the leap—repeated iambs rev into an I am, I am, I am exuberance.

Hungarian thrusts hard into initial syllables and then retreats—Tum ta, Tum ta ta, Tum ta ta ta. The language can sound like the dissipation of a bouncing ball, losing height, velocity—disappointing itself to a stop. The English I am translates into the Hungarian *vagyok*—the rising emphasis of English becomes declining in Hungarian. Given the strain of having to punch out those initial syllables, each repetition of *vagyok, vagyok, vagyok* becomes more plaintive, less and less convincing. Consider what happens if we punch the I in I am—I am, I am, I am—it dissolves into Sisyphustian whininess. What repeats, and repeats, as Stein tells us—especially without conscious awareness—affects, shapes, and identifies us most. So, for example, given the same decibels, the most deleterious noises are those repetitive ones to which we have become accustomed—the brain having been altered to accommodate the sounds, tied up in processing them. It's

called sensory fatigue. Gone numb to such noises, we are less able to react if necessary. According to The Better Health Channel website, the symptoms of sensory fatigue will seem aspecific: headache, elevated blood pressure, fatigue, irritability, digestive disorders, increased susceptibility to colds, and other minor infections. Things you can't prove in court. There's a kind of despair in having so succumbed that you don't hear the constant jack-hammering under your window. So it is not untoward to ask whether and how language rhythms—a most pervasive aspect of speech of which most of us are too rarely conscious—might affect us.

Consider, for example, the effect of the first line of “The Music of the Night” in *The Phantom of the Opera*: Nighttime sharpens, heightens each sensation. The pulse of this line is the stressed/unstressed beat called the trochee: Nighttime, sharpens, heightens each sensation. Both Andrew Lloyd Webber's music and Charles Hart's lyrics are brilliantly keyed, rhythmically, to the intent and dynamics of the scenes in which the song is performed. Sung by the title character—a denizen of the bowels of the opera house, a man whose face is yin/yanged by a mask into darkness and light—it is fitting that his song of seduction to Christine, the musical's Persephone, be predominantly in a downward lilting trochaic rhythm—the opposite of the upward tending iamb customary in English: Down, down, down—says the music, says the rhythm of the dark (k)night.

Compare “The Music of the Night” to the first line of “The Lusty Month of May” from Lerner and Lowe's musical *Camelot*: Tra la! It's May! The lusty month of May! Wrought in the traditional English iambic pentameter—the line is rhythmically light, frolicking, gay. Tra la! It's May! The lusty month of May! Spring has come. Persephone's risen! Had either composer or lyricist introduced downward tending notes and rhythms, it would have lent an ominous note, which would have introduced too soon the note of tragedy into the musical. Traditionally, too, the downward tending poetic rhythm—the Tum ta ta dactyl, was used by the ancient Greeks in their elegies, especially to commemorate children. Each poetic line would have five mournful dactyls as the predominant rhythm in each line, followed by the very finalizing stress/stress spondee. The affect of these accumulating dactyls is an unbearable despair. Tum ta ta, Tum ta ta, Tum ta ta, Tum ta ta Tum ta ta, Tum Tum is a dirging drum. The epic poem in Latin also uses the dactylic hexameter, but more freely varies the balance of dactyls and spondees in a line. Joshua Schuster writes that these dactylic hexametric lines correspond to or are derived from marches and other war rituals. John Philip Sousa's marches are predominantly right-foot-forward trochaic, whereas the rhythm of a galloping horse is dactylic, as is, interestingly enough, the dactylic rhythm of a dance most loved by Hungarians: the waltz.

On the lighter side, limericks in English—driven by iambic rhythms—generate very bawdy, fairly raunchy, invariably comical, illicit texts. The last line always comes off as a punch line. Once you get the joke of it, you're done. In Hungarian, on the other hand, where the iamb is foreign, and the rhythms trochaic and dactylic, limericks tend to be more philosophical, as English rhythms do not. They elicit reflection and rereading. But what shift of meaning happens between English and Hungarian? To further explore, I

compared Shakespeare's "Sonnet 73" in to its Hungarian translation. The first line is written in iambic pentameter—five iambs: That time, of year, thou mayst, in me, behold. The native speaker of English is most likely to stress time, year, mayst, me, hold. The stressed syllables create their own subliminal emphasis—time mayst me hold—time may sustain me. But with the added emphasis, the conditional sense of mayst—perhaps time will hold me—is preempted by the directive sense, with the speaker in control—time, you may hold me. In renowned poet Lőrinc Szabó's Hungarian translation—Nézd, életem az az évszak, amelyben—nézd, él..., év... are most likely to be stressed: look, life, year. There's a stridence here—imperative—even vigilance—as compared to the wistful statement in English. And whereas the English line settles into five, steady, predictable, and hence comforting iambs—the security of age and experience—the Hungarian struggles to maintain the energy of the stressed syllables. Tum, Tum ta ta, ta ta, Tum ta, ta ta ta. In short, the English iambic strides forward where the Hungarian dactyl, trochee, pyrrhic limps to keep up with the unstressed beats. Arguably, at least for this poem, the rhythm of the Hungarian translation—halting yet directive—may be more mimetic of the halting energy of maturity. But that smacks of the mimetic fallacy—in another context, it would be to argue that you have to be boring when you write about boredom. And Shakespeare's sonnets as a whole tend to tend toward affirmation, immortality, control. He considers the written word to be immortality, itself.

What creates its relentless down, down, down-going rhythm? The socio-psychological, political, and geographical answer is extremely complex and would take us into difficult questions of national identity. For now, we can discern what creates these rhythms grammatically. Let's revisit what Balázs writes about how Hungarian builds words. The difference in predominant rhythms between the two languages is determined, in great part, by contrasting syntactic—coordinating—structures. The Hungarian language is agglutinative—instead of dividing the language into discrete meaning/word units, it constantly combines—literally glues them into new words. So, for example, into the house translates into házba in Hungarian. Ház means house, ba is the suffix for into. And there's no need for the separate definite article the. It's elegant in simple formulations. But more often than not Hungarian creates long strings of unstressed syllables such as the 21-letter single word elkaposztalanítatotak, which translates into the 20-letter but five words of the English you took the cabbage out, or the 38-letter megbecstelenítetlenségesekedétekért which barely translates into the seven (or four)-word English "because of your-holier-than-thou attitude," or my current favorite, the slowly evolving, hard to bite off and chew anything-but-quick 15-letter word gyorskiszolgáló, which is what the Hungarian chapter of McDonald's touts itself as being: fast. Hungarians, themselves, enjoy lampooning this tendency of the language to lard on syllables that turns your brain into an abacus. Perhaps that is why there are so many significant Hungarian mathematicians.

The rest of Susanna Lippóczy Rich's essay can be found in ISSUE 5 of PILVAX. Locally available in Budapest.