

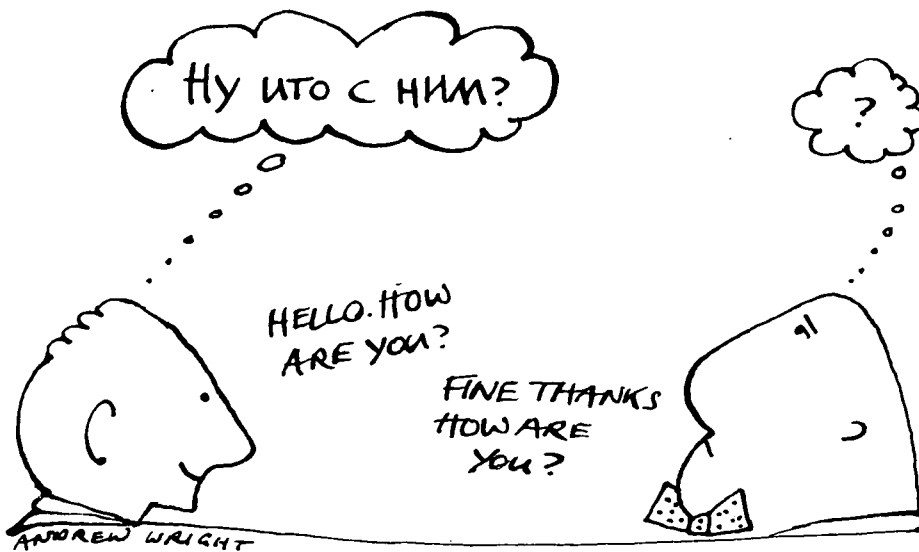
English in Hungary Today

Hungary experienced four centuries of Habsburg rule from Vienna, with German the official language until the late 19th century and French the language of the social graces. Since the Second World War, Hungary has been within the Soviet sphere of influence, in which Russian is the most powerful linguistic influence. How then does English fare in Hungary today?

Not too badly, according to Melinda Potechay in the *Budapest Daily News* of 11/12 May 85. In fact,

its recent advance has been 'spectacular', with an average of 130,000 students of all ages learning the language each year. 70,000 more learn on their own outside the main institutions and an unknown number have been tuning in to the BBC's course *Follow Me*, which has been broadcast on Hungarian television and radio. More students now learn English than German, with the result that there are over 11,000 in higher education studying English to 4,000 studying the old imperial language.

Earlier Hungarian interest in things English was restricted to the employment of nannies from England by middle-class families before the war and to adopting English fashions. Now, however, 'English signifies modern technology, up-to-date science and commerce, there are jobs today in Hungary where English is a precondition, like foreign trade, business and service industries. Research into branches of science like medicine, social sciences and chemistry all require a knowledge of English to keep abreast with the latest developments.' It also signifies, says a university professor whom Potechay quotes, 'the Americanization of mass culture' as well as of science and commerce. It is, he says, 'not just a Hungarian phenomenon.'



Speaking in critical tongues

Meanwhile, in the United States (as reported by the *Washington Post* of April 85) legislation has been passed providing \$2.45 million to help 'bright young men and women' with a passion for learning Dinka, Ga, Pushto, Ewe-Fon, Tamil, Telugu, Japanese, Chinese or even French, Spanish, German and Italian – all languages on the nation's new critical list.

These and others are all 'critical languages' because of their importance to the US in terms of national security, geographical location, economic ties and/or scientific research. There are evidently about 150 languages currently on the list, but it is in the process of being pared down further 'to a working list of a dozen or so very critical foreign tongues'. The fact that many of these tongues are obscure to most Americans reflects, says the *Post*, their 'language illiteracy'; in the view of many linguists, 'the general inability of Americans to speak anything but English with fluency . . . only serves to limit their involvement and exchanges with other countries and lifestyles.'

A post-post-colonial comeback

Melanie Butler reports in the *EFL Gazette* (May 85) a speech by Anandatissa De Alwis, Minister of State in Sri Lanka, to a conference on English for Special Purposes held in Colombo under the sponsorship of the British Council and the Asia Foundation.

The teaching of English throughout Asia, Africa and the Pacific, said the Minister, should be placed on the same level as the World Health Organization or UNESCO. 'For one-tenth of the money they pay for "star wars", the Americans can get the whole of Asia listening to their president. English teaching is a bigger weapon in the armoury of the English-speaking peoples than star wars.'

The Minister agreed, in an inter-

view afterwards, that the promotion of Sinhala and Tamil had weakened the once-powerful position of English in Sri Lanka, but noted that the West could share the blame for that and for the subsequent loss of English to a whole generation of Sri Lankans. The very concept of mother-tongue education, he said, 'was a western concept promulgated by western experts in Unesco and the like.' He regretted that emotional politics had damaged the position of English in the post-colonial period. Now, however, there was 'a huge demand for English from the mass of the people.' It was necessary for technology, and people were fully aware that English-educated Sri Lankans were the 'privileged class'.