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**The Ideological Metamorphoses of Vernacular Languages in Central
Europe. From Maria Theresa to Joseph II**
THESIS SUMMARY

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"Man is an animal trapped in webs of significance he himself has spun"¹ is one of the conclusions reached in anthropologist Clifford Geertz's book *The Interpretation of Cultures*. It would be difficult to find a better description for the fluctuations in the process of perceiving, relating to, and using vernacular languages in Central Europe over the last millennium. The political trajectory of these languages within the Kingdom of Hungary spans from the first crowned king, Stephen I, to the first uncrowned king. The former is glorified as a founder, while the latter is seen more as a destroyer. The period between these two reigns records all the possible changes and forms of politicization that vernacular languages could have undergone. In both cases, a utilitarian vision of languages is evident, with the fundamental difference being that Stephen I believed that without the practical knowledge brought by foreigners—whom the king should accept to consolidate the kingdom—the empire would be weak and impotent, while the uncrowned king, known as the king with the hat, wanted to ensure that through these languages, the state's message would reach the target audience. Consequently, the first valued vernacular languages to obtain something from his subjects, while the second cultivated them with the aim of offering something, specifically the discourse of the state."

The model instituted by the founder of the kingdom, one in which the perception of vernacular languages was strongly constrained by the ideological framework of universalism and the deeply hierarchical system of feudalism, did not provide a conducive environment for language to be considered more than a mere tool of communication. Interest in these languages did not transcend the stage of indifferent pragmatism, with the state and ecclesiastical authorities only concerned with transmitting their normative message. In connection with this, the identity needs of communities—defined socially by the feudal estate system and, in a much broader metaphysical sense, through religious affiliation—were satisfied within (and by) the social and religious framework encapsulated in the feudal system. In short, the need for aggregation, meaning, cohesion, and identity did not experience a deficit that would drive it towards seeking other models of collective identification. Vernacular languages were relegated to a peripheral status, ignored, and used indiscriminately alongside the cultured (liturgical) and diplomatic languages (Latin—the *lingua franca* until the early 18th century). Given the strong identity markers anchored in the value

¹ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, *apud*. Mircea Vasilescu, *Cultura română pe înțelesul patrioților*, Ed. Humanitas, București, 2018, p. 229

system of feudalism, sovereigns could afford to neglect vernacular languages, allowing themselves the luxury of not knowing the languages spoken by their subjects, or speaking in a myriad of dialects that more often hindered their diplomatic relations or interactions with those in their inner circle. Charles V probably remains the most notorious example of a polyglot monarch, but also one who was quite clumsy in the efficient use of the linguistic repertoire he acquired, not so much through a coherent educational program with political ends, but rather as a result of biographical chance and cultural influences from his own proximity.

The first breach in the perception of vernacular languages was felt in the early decades of the 16th century, when Martin Luther—whose defensive plea at the Diet of Worms (1521), delivered in German, could not be understood by the Holy Roman Emperor (Charles V), who had just denounced him as a notorious heretic—triggered the Protestant Reformation. The need to construct confessional identities, by distinguishing from the other, was the driving force that awakened the vernacular languages from their dormancy and mobilized them in the process of confessionalization. Clearly, confessionalization did not treat vernacular languages as objects of worship, worthy of being glorified as the primary element of modern identities; they were still considered tools, perpetuating their subordinate relationship to politics—unlike the modern era, which would elevate language policies (the politics of language) to the status of dogma. However, it succeeded in introducing two innovations that would facilitate, in the long term, the renaissance of languages in the Romantic era: it pulled them out of the sphere of orality and placed them at the foundation of written cultures, and—thanks to the principle of *sola scriptura*—it generated a proto-massification, a horizontal spread, to make them as accessible as possible to the faithful in their effort to address the divine directly, without the intermediary role played by Latin and the clergy.

The effect of the Protestant Reformation on vernacular languages is undeniable, but it did not go beyond their use as tools in a conflict with an identity (religious) stake. The time for linguistic wars, for fierce competition in which languages would themselves become legitimizing ideologies, had not yet arrived. The interpretation I have proposed starts from the correlation of linguistic revival with the collapse of feudalism and from the postulate that the metamorphosis of vernacular languages into principles of social organization is not possible in a political framework dominated by strict hierarchies. This process was only possible in the context of the delegitimization of universal monarchy—in the treaties of Utrecht/Rastatt and Baden in 1713–1714—replaced by the

idea of the nation-state and the triumph of the principle of balance of power in international relations.

In the pursuit of new principles of legitimacy, both the central authority and part of the feudal elites—who had adopted, through mimicry and opportunism, the cultural model of Vienna—soon found themselves in opposing camps. Pressured by the similar projects of other nationalities, the noble elites of Central Europe found themselves compelled to take the initiative in sponsoring national revival movements, otherwise a process traditionally (in the West) assumed by the bourgeoisie. Of course, there was variation from one ethnic group to another, depending on historical legacy and social structures. In the case of the Romanians, for example, there was no distinct political elite, no Romanian feudal estate—and the thin layer of small Romanian nobles and knezes was politically integrated into the *natio nobilium*, the estate of Hungarian nobles, a supra-ethnic political construct in which Croat Nikola Zrinski/Zrinyi Miklós or Romanian knezes could easily be part. This responsibility fell to the ecclesiastical elite, starting with Vlădica Ioan Inochentie Micu-Klein and, following in his footsteps, the pleiad of intellectuals of the Transylvanian School.

The central authority, in this case Vienna, was compelled by military failures to undertake a modernization process that would ensure its survival. The stakes were survival itself, which is why in the specialized literature, the phenomenon is described as defensive modernization. The great challenge was to create a centralized state with uniform institutions. The inevitable premise was the adoption of a new official language. The way in which the monarchs in question—Maria Theresa and Joseph II—conceived this program was that it would be limited to the public sphere, imposing an official language without displacing the languages spoken by the heterogeneous multitude of subjects. Moreover, to ensure that the social disciplining envisioned by the Enlightened state would be successful, the two monarchs actively supported the vernacular languages.

Additionally, there are several arguments in favor of declaring the Theresean stage much more effective than the Josephinian one: her reforms in the field of education did not directly interfere with the privileges of the nobility and were introduced in agreement with the representatives of the estates (Hungarian Chancellor Esterházy Ferenc collaborated on the creation of the *Ratio Educationis*). Her quality as a *Realpolitiker* was evident in her awareness that through diplomacy, prudence, and a lot of tact, as well as by managing the nobility's pride, certain potentially unpopular reforms could be introduced without risking failure. Specifically, the Empress resorted

to certain symbolic gestures that Joseph disavowed from the perspective of a rationalist who placed no value on symbolic matters or the sensitivities associated with them.

In 1771, when Maria Theresa recovered the Holy Right Hand (Szent Jobb) from Ragusa—which increased her popularity among the Hungarian nobility—and placed it in the castle of Buda, Joseph considered it a waste of time, the unnecessary parade of relics that belonged in museums. Thanks to such gestures—which also included political acts, such as the reattachment of the Banat to Hungary in 1778—the path for Theresean reforms was smoothed. The Ratio Educationis, the fundamental act of the Theresean educational system, could be implemented without facing resistance from the estates precisely because of these gestures that managed to appease the sensitivities of the estates. Theresean language policy was based on two principles: institutional uniformity through a single official language—German—and the social disciplining of subjects through the spoken vernacular languages.

Incomparably more ambitious in scope and intensity, the institutional homogenization policy of her son, Emperor Joseph II, could not be realized due to certain objective factors that Joseph failed to consider: he was convinced that the lack of resistance from the estates regarding the introduction of the German language in a special administrative unit—the Military Frontier, directly subordinated to the Aulic War Council—represented a guarantee that the same policy of standardization through a single language could be extended to the lower levels of administration. His excessive confidence in his own persuasive abilities, which bordered on overconfidence and hubris, led him to believe that his dialogue partners adhered to the same values, recognized and prioritized the state's interest, and, above all, that they could be convinced with rational arguments to accept reforms even when they were diametrically opposed to their class interests. To this was added his proverbial aversion to noble privileges, which he identified as the supreme evil, the barrier that obstructed the path to state modernization and the common good.

At the same time, it remains an unresolved mystery as to why the sovereign who, in his youth, in *Rêveries politiques*, insisted on having unlimited power and explicitly demanded to be allowed to introduce reforms without seeking the subjects' consent, would ask the Hungarian Chancellery's opinion regarding the change of the official language. The Language Decree of May 11, 1784, was eventually introduced after an epistolary dialogue with Esterházy Ferenc, in the form desired by the sovereign. Resorting to archival sources, especially those from the Hungarian Aulic Chancellery's archival fund preserved at the Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár, has helped us complete and

nuance the existing information, a process supplemented by a critical re-reading of the edited documents in the hope of expanding historical knowledge.

At least two conclusions emerge from the current stage of research: despite some historians who continue—albeit unintentionally—to perpetuate the myth of the Germanizing emperor, the reading of documents and historiographical consensus should definitively close the file on this myth, which has persisted to this day. The second conclusion involves placing the Language Decree within a broader process, as an integral part, which did not set the tone for linguistic nationalism but merely catalysed a preexisting phenomenon, moving it from the cultural sphere into the arena of political debates. At the same time, we opted to introduce related themes, such as his refusal to be crowned, a logical measure from Josephine strategy's perspective, but one that ultimately led to self-sabotage and provided a legal lever into the hands of his opponents.

The revocation of the Language Decree through the Restitution Edict of January 26/28, 1790, about a month before the premature death of the reformist emperor (February 20, 1790), did not mean the suspension of debates regarding the language issue. The politicization of the phenomenon was felt during the diet convened by his brother, Leopold II, between 1790–1791, when the estates, agitated and obsessed with restoration, sought to annul the entire Josephine edifice, placing the language issue on the agenda of the debates. It was for the first time that the diet legislated articles of law by which the Hungarian language was to replace² the same Latin language that Joseph II had declared dead just a few years earlier.

² The Diet voted in this regard with Article 16 of 1791 and Article 7 of 1792; see Pajkossy Gábor (Ed.), *Magyarország története a 19. században. Szöveggyűjtemény...* pp. 54, 66 – 67.

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