Hungarian historical anthroponomy – within the context of language theory and the history of science

1. In my lecture, I wish to present a general (theory-historical) overview of Hungarian historical anthroponomy in the past one hundred years. I think that, beyond providing an insight into the procedures of historical anthroponomy in Hungary, such a presentation, through its general nature (and through analysing the teaching of the Hungarian example), might prove useful for onomastic researches in other languages, as well.

2. The usual form of science-history writing is positivist in nature and presumes the continuous accumulation of knowledge. Nevertheless, in this language-theoretical overview of the 20th century Hungarian historical anthroponomy research, I am going to use the non-cumulative alternative of science-history writing opposed to the above-mentioned classical model. By means of this unusual method, it becomes possible to shed light on numerous language theoretical and methodological interrelations which can be considered to be new, i.e. previously unobserved in Hungarian onomastics, and which primarily concern name etymologies.

The starting points of my theory-historical overview are THOMAS S. KUHN’s science-philosophical theory published in 1962 and the 1997 typology by VERA BÉKÉS originating from KUHN’s work. According to these models and abandoning the theory of accumulation, I assume that the development of science consists of alternations of incommensurable view systems, so-called paradigms, showing essential differences in their presuppositions. However, in a somewhat different way from the above-mentioned models, in my overview a major role, implying inner contradictions, is given to those inclusions of the view systems defeated in the battle of paradigms, which were preserved in the dominant paradigm that became canonized as science.

When applying this point of view to the 20th century Hungarian historical anthroponomy research, I will take, relying on BÉKÉS’s work, WITTGENSTEIN’s distinction between private and non-private language viewpoints as paradigm-determining features.

3. Looking at present-day Hungarian historical anthroponomy research from this point of view, one can see that the view which is dominant in this scientific field nowadays dates back one and a half centuries. From the battle of the paradigms in the second half of the 19th century, approximately by the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, exactly that private language philosophy triumphed over the other, which can be considered dominant even today.
Although, in other fields of Hungarian onomastics, the two schools of the private view (neogrammarianism, and then the structural view) were present during these nearly one and a half centuries, historical anthroponymy can be considered to be much more homogeneous in this respect. This field of onomastics is still dominated by analytical and positivist-based neogrammarianism.

4. I wish to analyze the reasons for this sort of homogeneity in the 20th century neogrammarianism-dominated Hungarian historical anthroponymy from a language-philosophical point of view. Doing so, I believe that it is advisable to start from the issue of how the positivist concept, which is characteristic of this view of language, became dominant in Hungary, and how the forms of basic neogrammarian principles and methods, which are in use even today, evolved.

Due to the neogrammarian nature or, in a wider sense, the positivist characteristic of Hungarian historical anthroponymy, the attention of this overview will be focused mainly on name etymology which is the most characteristic genre of analytical onomastics.

5. Although all etymological assumptions, intentionally or unintentionally, are based on the researchers’ sense of language, the representatives of the two view systems see the scientific applicability of this factor in a different way. While the romantic-liberal (i.e. non-private) etymologists base their research largely on natural sense of (mother) language, the followers of the private view, due to their faith in objective truth, strive to exclude this consideration to the greatest extent possible, and thus, they base their findings primarily on data and the interrelations that are determined by private (i.e. Cartesian) presuppositions and that can be drawn from data.

6. In the etymologies of the second half of the 19th century both aspects were present. In the etymologies of the turn of the century, however, it was the private view that became dominant, i.e. the one that became the only accepted representative of science. Some traces of the battle between the paradigms can only be observed in the aftermath of “Magyar nyelvtörténeti szótár a legrégibb nyelvemlékektől a nyelvújításig” [“Hungarian language historical dictionary from the earliest linguistic records up until neology”] edited by ZSIGMOND SIMONYI and GÁBOR SZARVAS in the last decade of the 19th century. ALADÁR BALLAGI’s 1903 critique of this work is the last episode of the 19th century paradigmatic battles, which took place between BALLAGI’s father and GÁBOR SZARVAS before and which concerned mostly other issues of linguistics.

The overwhelming response of the positivist view to ALADÁR BALLAGI’s critique was given by JANOS MELICH, who, in his writings “Laikusok évada” [“The season of laymen”] and “Ritus explorandae veritatis” in 1904, considered BALLAGI’s non-positivist ways of reading (and explanations) of proper names as
simply amateurish. However, this attitude of MELICH is well reflected in the
titles of his above-mentioned writings.

The dominant positivist view became monarch in the beginning of the 20th
century and its etymological interest (and, connected to this, the motivating
effect of historical toponomastics) were so favourable to the analytical school of
anthroponymy that it began to improve rapidly and, by the 1920s, mainly due to
the writings of JÁNOS MELICH, ZOLTÁN GOMBOCZ, and DEZSŐ PAIS, it became
well established even with respect to the scientific principles and methods of this
paradigm.

7. The private language concept characterizing the whole 20th century
typically manifests itself in the neogrammarian name-explanations, as the
authors of these etymologies consider natural languages fundamentally
homogeneous. Thus, they can notice language changes only in a temporal, or
maybe in an areal aspect. However, they interpret these two types of
heterogeneity in a restricted sense, within a Cartesian framework.

According to the non-private view, language can be grasped only in its
dynamism, while positivists view the natural heterogeneity of language
(including proper names) as fairly static, i.e. they describe temporal change as
some kind of movement from one homogeneous state to another equally
homogeneous one. The special, private interpretation of areal heterogeneity is
primarily shown in that the authors of positivist etymologies draw a distinct
borderline between the languages. This way of etymologizing creates the
dichotomy of forms of inner origin and of foreign etymon in all etymologies.
The dialects within a language are viewed in a similar way, since they are
considered to be fundamentally homogeneous and more or less firmly distinct
from each other.

The basic methodological principle of positivist etymologies is also of
Cartesian nature: according to the non-private view, language (and proper name)
change can be brought about by every factor that can influence an individual’s
life, while private etymologies are based on the neogrammarian presupposition
of mechanical, speaker-independent sound changes, i.e. on the presumptive
existence of sound laws.

This is well reflected in a 1913 etymology by JÁNOS MELICH. According to
this explanation the old Hungarian anthroponym Ajton ~ Ajtony can be traced
back to the forms Achtum ~ Ohtum, whose consonant-connection including a
palatovaler voiceless spirant and a -t originated from -lt- and then, by a regular
sound change, it became -jt-. Since neogrammarians consider the changes \( i > u \)
and \( n > m \) as natural, MELICH draws the conclusion that the anthroponym Ajtony
is of Turkish origin, because, along the same lines, it can be connected to the
Turkish common noun altn ‘gold’ and to Turkish anthroponyms including this
word as an anterior constituent.
However, it could be instructive to have a look at the aftermath of this anthroponym explanation. MELICH’s Ajtony-etymology received a lot of criticism based on the same methodology immediately after its publication and, at the end of 1913, the author himself slightly modified his view. These two facts are indicative of the general application of this neogrammarian principle of explanation and, at the same time, its vagueness.

8. Considering all these factors it is not surprising that neogrammarian methodology received criticism already in the second half of the 19th century. This did not remain without effect: due to the critical remarks, the representatives of the school modified their hypotheses fairly soon (at the end of the 19th century).

Since criticism was levelled mainly at the exceptionless theorem of sound changes, neogrammarians, admitting the unacceptability of this principle, introduced another supplementary methodological notion, viz. analogy. This factor, as a component tied to the individual and contrasting with the supposed mechanical sound changes, was meant to explain the exceptions to the alleged “regular” sound changes.

As analogy has been based on the associations of the speakers one has had to consider it as non-private by nature. Due to this analogy has been obviously appropriate to counterpoint the assumed speaker-independent sound changes being Cartesian by nature. By means of analogy, neogrammarians could easily explain those cases, which were not compatible with the assumed physical sound laws and which were deviant from a positivist perspective. Thus, the dominant (positivist) paradigm began to include an element, as a subprinciple, in a latent way, from a non-private (i. e. anti-Cartesian) language concept.

As analogy belonged to the other paradigm, building it into the positivist line of thought was not simple, because it resulted in a special inner contradiction in neogrammarian etymologies. The difficulty of this integration is clearly seen in an early attempt of neogrammarians (at the end of the 19th century) to give explanations by means of analogy only if the phonetic form in question cannot be explained with the help of sound laws.

In this way analogy, which is based on the speakers’ association, could only be integrated into the neogrammarian line of thought with a kind of Cartesian restriction. Although the language users’ associations differ individually, within the framework of these positivist etymologies the associations of the speakers of a language or a dialect are uniform: they always appear at the same time and in the same way.

The fact that analogy, being non-private in nature, became a methodological principle necessarily led to the “loosening” of the rigid (Cartesian) concept of the school. Due to this “loosening” which, in another respect, is also often mentioned in the classical science-historical writings, some onomasticians, such
as ZOLTÁN GOMBÓCZ, who was active in the first three decades of the century and the other etymologists later in general, were able to represent a much more flexible version of this school. The rate of the flexibility of these linguists’ vein of thinking (enriched with anti-Cartesian elements) depends on the proportion of the latent non-private features in their language concept.

9. Analogy, based on the language users’ associations, is actually the natural manifestation of the speakers’ sense of language. The use of sense of (mother) language as a methodological device, supplementing neogrammarian sound laws, is well exemplified by JÁNOS MELICH’s writings, in which he discusses the problems of borrowing Christian names.

In 1905 MELICH still believed that the Christian names without the -us ending came into Hungarian from those languages, in which they also lack this ending, i.e. from Italian, German and the Slavic languages. MELICH considered the Hungarian names to be completely explicable with the help of neogrammarian sound laws.

However, in 1914 he noticed a number of Christian names (Ágoston, Ambrus, Anna, Antal, Péter, etc.), which, by means of the neogrammarian methodology, could not be derived from the above-mentioned languages. Therefore, he came forward with another hypothesis, now based on sense of language. According to the new hypothesis, the Christian names with Latin -us endings came into Hungarian without any changes, but the -us endings coincided with the diminutive suffixes -is, -üs in the Hungarian names, and consequently, the sense of language conceptualised this function into the -us endings of loan Christian names, and then, by clipping the assumed diminutive suffix, it created a new, shorter name.

The use of the notion of sense of language, coming from the other paradigm, as a secondary principle is clearly shown in that, later (in 1940), JÁNOS MELICH was looking for another explanation for borrowing Christian names, which was more consistent with the neogrammarian language concept. From this time on, he did not consider the above-mentioned theory exclusive, thus he did not regard the majority of Christian names without -us as the forms coming from Latin Christian names with -us endings and then being clipped, but he derived them from the different declined forms of their Latin equivalents. (This situation did not really change later: although many a researcher dealt with the problem of the origin of Christian names, still, up to this very day, Hungarian historical anthroponymy is characterized by the coexistence of different views.)

10. Analogy was introduced as a methodological notion so that the cases not consistent with the regular changes could be embedded in the neogrammarian way of thought. As a result, this subprinciple gave explanation to a number of name forms (and these explanations were satisfactory within this paradigm).
Nevertheless, analogy can only be used as an etymological subprinciple if the analogue sound sequence, which would be able to be the basis for association, exists in the given language or dialect. In the absence of such a phonetic form, neogrammarian etymologists can only talk about the vague origin of these name forms, or can only refer to some kind of associative changes with undiscovered reasons (for example, dissimilation or the appearance of extra sounds).

To etymologize a name from a private perspective, beside the above-mentioned methodological uncertainty, the philological ground-work of name explanations has been also problematic up to now. Although, in the spirit of the importance of data within positivism, several collections publishing names were compiled, old Hungarian anthroponyms have not been systematically collected until KATALIN FEHÉRTŐI’s reference book published this year. Thus, previously etymologists had to carry out tiresome philological pre-researches to be able to find the appropriate data.

11. Due to the language theoretical and methodological contradictions, revealed above, and the defects of data collection (and other factors to be analysed later), the neogrammarian anthroponym explanations could not result in the straightforward etymons a positivist methodology would expect, in accordance with the faith in absolute truth.

To illustrate this kind of uncertainty in private name etymologies, I mention here, from several appropriate examples, the 20th century history of the etymology of Cseke.

In GYULA ZOLNAI’s document-dictionary published at the beginning of the 20th century, he posits that this anthroponym might be derived from the Old Hungarian verb csek(ik) ‘cross, wade through’ or the nominal cseke ‘kind of grape’. However, ZOLNAI changed his position immediately after JÁNOS MELICH took a stand on the Slavic origin of the name in his study, in which he described ALADÁR BALLAGI’s non-private etymologies as unscientific (including the derivation of Cseke from a Hungarian common word). As a result of this, in the preface to ZOLNAI’s dictionary, ZOLNAI made fairly long apologies and mentioned JÁNOS MELICH as the only representative of scientific truth and published a correction following MELICH’s above-mentioned conception.

This, however, was not the end of the 20th century history of this name etymology: after MELICH, referring to neogrammarian phonetic rules, published the foreign (Slavic) origin of the anthroponym Cseke as a proven (positivist) fact, it was somewhat surprising that he and GOMBOCZ later claimed that the conception, according to which the name is of Slavic origin, was deficient, as the anthroponym Cseke was derived from the original form Cseka, which, however, was, actually, the diminutive suffixed form of anthroponym Csek (otherwise being of unknown origin).
The etymology of Cseke has not been disambiguated up to the present day: while MIKLÓS KÁZMÉR adds the explanation of GOMBOCZ and MELICH in his 1993 dictionary of family names, LAJOS KISS, in 1988, returns to the previous concept, considering Cseke as the derivation of the anthroponym Csek being of Slavic origin, but not excluding the possibility of the common word explanation (classified as unprofessional by MELICH previously), as LAJOS KISS also mentions the derivation of the Hungarian verb csökik ~ csekik ‘be backward’ with the suffix -e.

12. The language-theoretical and methodological contradictions unveiled so far are characteristic not only of historical anthroponymy, but of the 20th century toponymic and common word etymologies determined also by neogrammarianism. Nevertheless, the problem of uncertain derivation (within the paradigm) is more apparent in the case of anthroponyms.

This is a consequence of the special features of these names: anthroponyms are, most of the times, (also) determined by factors relating to cultural history, they are short (often consisting of one syllable) and one often can hardly reconstruct their old pronunciations because of their ambiguous orthographical features. Due to these factors, the methodological contradictions are more easily revealed in the case of anthroponyms. As a result, within a neogrammariant-positivist framework, these names can be derived from almost any language, which was in contact or in cultural connection with Hungarian at one time.

To illustrate this, from the several possible examples I pick out an attempt at an etymology of an anthroponym in ‘Magyar etymológiai szótár’ (‘Hungarian etymological dictionary’) by JÁNOS MELICH and ZOLTÁN GOMBOCZ published between 1914 and 1944.

In this work, the authors claim that the old anthroponym Ata can be derived equally from three languages. They think it is possible that this proper name is derived from the Turkish (not attested) *Ata anthroponym (cf. common Turkish ata ‘father’), or from a Latin personal name (cf. Atho), or from a Hungarian common noun (ata ‘father’, later as atya), too.

13. The relatively low number of anthroponym typologies in the 20th century specialist literature can also be explained by this kind of uncertainty of etymologies (and, of course, the analytical interest of this branch of Hungarian linguistics): opposed to the later results of this paradigm being observed in the field of the explanation of common words and historical toponyms, the anthroponymic etymologies, which would be able to form the basis for typologies, have not been made clear yet.

Thus, in the new anthroponymic publications, structuralism could not really manifest itself opposed to historical toponymy which developed in parallel with the anthroponym until the 1930s. It is not a coincident that, in the respect of
language-theory and methodology, historical anthroponymy did not exceed its analytical-etymological nature originating from the beginning of the 20th century, although it enriched the language-history, the orthography-history and the historical science with a number of new findings.

14. I do believe that my brief overview presenting the past one hundred years of Hungarian historical anthroponymy, embedded within a language philosophical context, can not only point to essential (language theoretical and methodological) interrelations in the field of historical anthroponymy in Hungary, but, through its general nature and non-positivist point of view, it can also help to solve potential etymological problems in the anthroponymy of other languages.

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