

MIKLÓS KONTRA

University of Szeged and Research Institute for Linguistics, Hungarian Academy of Sciences,
Budapest

kontra@nytud.hu

A tribute to Michael Clyne*

The world-famous Australian sociolinguist Michael Clyne retired from the University of Melbourne at the end of 2004, after a long and illustrious career in languages and linguistics. Colleagues in his university celebrated his contributions to the many different fields of linguistic endeavor and research with a series of events, one of which was a collection of email tributes to Clyne from Australian and international colleagues. The collection is available on the Internet at <http://www.rumaccc.unimelb.edu.au/clyne/tribute.pdf> (19 July 2010). Because Hungarians in the Carpathian Basin and Hungarian linguists should be greatly indebted to Michael Clyne, and because most of them are unaware of his enormous theoretical and practical contributions to easing their linguistic plight in the last decade of the 20th century, I consider it appropriate to print-publish in our journal my email-tribute to Michael Clyne, which was originally presented to him, along with well over 60 tributes, on 1 April 2005.

Michael, the activist

Linguists in many countries of the world know Michael Clyne in many capacities. Clyne as authority on contact linguistics, then on German sociolinguistics, then as inventor (discoverer?) of pluricentric languages, prolific author of books published by Cambridge University Press, Mouton de Gruyter, or by little-known-in-Europe Australian publishers. He is on the board of many a leading journal. He is one of the best known sociolinguists today, and that is no small achievement, given the size and popularity of sociolinguistics in all corners of the world five years into the 21st century.

As far as I know, Michael first came to Hungary, at least in the capacity of a linguist, in the early 1990s. It was after his book on pluricentric languages was published. This is important because (1) there is nothing about Hungarian as a pluricentric language in that book, and (2) the idea of pluricentricity immediately provoked one of the greatest and fiercest battles in the history of Hungarian linguistics. For all we needed to do was to read *Pluricentric Languages* and think a minute or two to realize that Hungarian WAS a pluricentric language *par excellence*. This did not sit well with the authoritarian figures in Hungarian linguistics a decade ago. They regarded the pluricentricity of Hungarian not as a sociolinguistic fact but as some erroneous western idea, the application of which

* This tribute was submitted to our journal in July 2010. Three months later the author and the editors learned with great sadness that Professor Clyne passed away on 29 October 2010.

to Hungarian would facilitate the forced assimilation of Hungarian minorities in Hungary's neighboring countries. The linguists who had the intellectual capacity to think about Hungarian as a pluricentric language were immediately called traitors to the nation or worse. Clyne did not know a thing about this when we invited him to the Linguistics Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Nor did he know or expect that his citations in Hungary would soon skyrocket. And no one had the slightest suspicion that this slender and soft-spoken gentleman linguist was a robust social activist when there was a need for it.

On 15 November 1995, the Slovak Parliament in Bratislava passed a highly restrictive state language law, whose aim was to forcibly assimilate the 600 thousand indigenous Hungarians who live in southern Slovakia. Michael, along with Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, Robert Phillipson, Phil Benson, Richard Benton and other colleagues, immediately responded to my call for an international protest. At that time I was an ACLS fellow at Michigan State University in the USA. Tove and Robert were in Denmark as usual, and Michael was in Australia. All four of us had email and an urge to protest this awful linguisticism in Slovakia.

I had zero experience in international protests. Tove and company had more than anyone would ever dream of. Michael, at least to my surprise, turned out to be a seasoned activist like Tove is. A call for protest was compiled and it was pre-signed by scores of famous sociolinguists like Fishman, Labov and Trudgill. An information pack was assembled with lots of materials for those who wished to read about the language situation in Slovakia before signing the protest. A model letter was composed for protesters. With Tove, Robert and myself, Michael spent many hours working on the protest every day for two months before April 17, 1996, the day when the protest was launched. As a result, well over a hundred letters were faxed, emailed and mailed to leading politicians in Slovakia. The protesters included not only linguists but academics in many other fields and at least one Member of the European Parliament. Meanwhile Michael found time to go on Australian Radio and gave an interview on Slovakia. Times were rather harsh in Slovakia in 1996. The leading Hungarian linguist István Lanstyák's telephone was tapped, his mail sent to me in Michigan came in an envelope slit open, and he could be arrested under a brand-new law on the protection of the Republic of Slovakia at any time the government liked. Consequently, in the final weeks of preparations before launching the protest, we decided to exclude Lanstyák from all communications. But this then meant that we could not ask him to verify that everything in our call for protest was correct. At this point Michael translated the call into some secret language and emailed it to Lanstyák. He was unable to break the code ...

Our protest generated predictable reactions from the Slovak government and some linguists in Slovakia, but it also gave rise to unwelcome email discussions on a few lists, some of them attacking the organizers of the protest *ad hominem*. Now was the time for Michael to combine scholarship with activism. He point by point showed, very patiently, how some of the attackers misrepresented the

facts. His calm rationality had little effect though, since those who started the “debate” were continually reinterpreting everything in order to prolong the discussion indefinitely. After a while a decision had to be made: quit the “debate” (which may create the false impression that Michael Clyne was one of those linguists who masterminded an international protest on unjustifiable grounds) or continue the unwinnable “debate” of reinterpretations and distortions. He knew when to quit.

Hungarians in Central Europe are indebted to Michael Clyne for the idea of pluricentric languages, which has made it possible for us to view ourselves (i.e. one cultural nation in eight political nations) in a sociolinguistically much more rational and realistic way than before. The most authoritative Hungarian dictionary *Magyar értelmező kéziszótár* (2nd edition, Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2003) now recognizes the legitimacy of contact varieties of Hungarian in the neighboring countries, for which Michael the linguist is in no small part responsible. Since 1996 the language rights violations in Slovakia have decreased, for which Michael the activist also bears some responsibility. *Köszönjük szépen, Michael, derék munka volt!*

Afterword: What was true in 2005, namely that “Since 1996 the language rights violations in Slovakia had decreased,” became outdated after 2006, when a new Slovak government modified the State Language Law, and vehemently reintroduced oppressive measures against Hungarians in Slovakia. As Prime Minister Robert Fico’s government lost office in June 2010, there are hopes now (in July 2010) for reducing the very serious interethnic tension and linguistic discrimination in Slovakia. It appears to me that the model letter we composed in 1996 has lost none of its force and could have been re-used, almost verbatim, when the Slovak-Hungarian language war reached new heights 13 years later. Although a Hungarian translation of this letter was published in *Szabad Újság* (11 December 1996, p. 9), the English original appears here for the first time:

MODEL LETTER

Dear Prime Minister/President,

I write to you to express my concern for the language rights of the indigenous Hungarian minority in Slovakia. The Law on the State Language of Slovakia passed on 15 November 1995 withdraws considerable linguistic human rights to minorities, which they enjoyed before, during, and after communism – until 1996. I believe that the new law, which appears to contravene various UN declarations, the European Charter for Minority and Regional Languages and the 1990 CSCE Copenhagen Document, runs counter to the present international tide of support for bilingualism and recognition of linguistic human rights of national and ethnic minorities.

The historical record and current experience equally seems to show that restrictive language legislation, rather than create social harmony, easily leads to disharmony and antagonism between various national communities in a state. Enjoyment of human dignity and language rights is best achieved for citizens of a state by making it possible for them to use the language of their choice, rather than the language mandated by a law which is enforced by severe fines. Such countries as Switzerland, Finland, Australia, Norway or Luxembourg have shown that it is state-wide promotion of linguistic tolerance that effectively creates social harmony between various language communities. On the other hand, the movement towards making English the official language of the USA, which is cited as an example in justifying the Law on the State Language of Slovakia, is condemned by the overwhelming majority of members of the Linguistic Society of America and is seen by many experts as a possible cause of future social conflicts.

I urge you to modify the State Language Law or complement it with a minority language law restoring and safeguarding the use of minority languages in Slovakia. I am convinced that the primacy of Slovak in Slovakia can be maintained and ensured without weakening the ethnic identity and curbing the linguistic human rights of minorities in your country.