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Peasant Men Can't Get Wives: Language Change and Sex Roles in a Bilingual Community

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Introduction

Differences between men's and women's speech are no longer thought to be characteristic only of 'exotic' languages and need no longer be categorical differences in order to be noticed by linguists (cf. Bodine 1975). In accordance with the sociolinguistic assumption that speech differences reflect the social distinctions deemed important by the community of speakers, sexual differentiation of speech is expected to occur whenever a social division exists between the roles of men and women – that is, universally. Further, recent work has shown that linguistic differences between men and women can appear at various levels of grammar, as well as in patterns of conversational interaction.

However, the effects of such sex differences on linguistic *change* have so far been noted only with respect to phonology, where it has been demonstrated that, along with other social correlates of synchronic linguistic diversity such as class and ethnicity, '. . . the sexual differentiation of speech often plays a major role in the mechanism of linguistic evolution' (Labov 1972: 303). The substantive aim of this paper is to describe the way in which the women of a Hungarian–German bilingual town in Austria have contributed to a change in patterns of language choice. The entire community is gradually and systematically changing from stable bilingualism to the use of only one language in all interactions. Sex-linked differences in language choice have influenced the overall community-wide process of change.

In the language usage patterns to be described here, young women are more advanced or further along in the direction of the linguistic change than older people and young men. This is one of the patterns which has been noted in correlational studies of phonological change in urban areas. Most such studies report that women use the newer, advanced forms more frequently than men. Newly introduced forms used mostly by women are sometimes prestigious (Trudgill 1972, revised version

reprinted in this volume, p. 21) and sometimes not (Fasold 1968). In many cases women, as compared to men of the same social class, use more of the new non-prestigious forms in casual speech, while moving further towards prestige models in formal speech. In other cases women do not lead in the course of linguistic change (reported in Labov 1972).

Although such findings are well documented, adequate explanations of them have not been offered. General statements about the linguistic innovativeness or conservatism of women will not account for the data. Neither Trudgill's (1972) suggestion that women are 'linguistically insecure', nor Labov's (1972) allusion to norms of linguistic appropriateness which allow women a wider expressive range than men, can convincingly explain why women are linguistically innovative in some communities and not in others (Nichols 1976, reprinted in this volume, p. 55). Women's role in language change has rarely been linked to the social position of women in the communities studied and to the related question of what women want to express about themselves in speech. In the present study, men's and women's ways of speaking are viewed as the results of strategic and socially meaningful linguistic choices which systematically link language change to social change: linguistic innovation is a function of speakers' differential involvement in, and evaluation of, social change.

Specifically, in the linguistic repertoire of the bilingual community to be described here, one of the languages has come to symbolize a newly available social status. Young women's language choices can be understood as part of their expression of preference for this newer social identity. The young women of the community are more willing to participate in social change and in the linguistic change which symbolizes it because they are less committed than the men to the traditionally male-dominated system of subsistence agriculture and because they have more to gain than men in embracing the newly available statuses of worker and worker's wife. In order to make this argument in detail several words of background are necessary, first about the community and second about its linguistic repertoire.

The Community

Oberwart (Felsőőr) is a town located in the province of Burgenland in eastern Austria. It has belonged to Austria only since 1921 when as part of the post-World War I peace agreements the province was detached from Hungary. The town itself has been a speech island since the 1500s when most of the original Hungarian-speaking population of the region was decimated by the Turkish wars and was replaced by German-speaking (and in some areas Croatian-speaking) settlers. In Oberwart, which was the largest of the five remaining Hungarian-speaking communities, bilingualism in German and Hungarian became common.

During the last thirty years Oberwart has grown from a village of 600 to a town of over 5,000 people because, as the county seat and new commercial center, it has attracted migrants. These new settlers have all been monolingual German speakers, mainly people from neighboring villages, who have been trained in commerce or

administration. The bilingual community today constitutes about a fourth of the town's population.

The indigenous bilinguals who will be the focus of this discussion have until recently engaged in subsistence peasant agriculture. Since World War II, however, most of the agriculturalists have become industrial workers or worker-peasants. By 1972 only about one third of the bilingual population was employed exclusively in peasant agriculture.

In short, Oberwart is an example of the familiar post-war process of urbanization and industrialization of the countryside often reported in the literature on the transformation of peasant Europe (e.g. Franklin 1969).

The Linguistic Repertoire

Bilingual communities provide a particularly salient case of the linguistic heterogeneity which characterizes all communities. In Oberwart the linguistic alternatives available to speakers include not only two easily distinguishable languages but also dialectal differences within each language. These 'dialects' are not homogeneous, invariant structures, but rather are best characterized as sets of covarying linguistic variables which have their own appropriate social uses and connotations (cf. Gumperz 1964; Ervin-Tripp 1972). It is possible for bilingual Oberwarters to move along a continuum from more standard to more local speech in either of their languages (cf. Gal 1976: III).

Of the many functions that code choice has been shown to serve in interaction (Hymes 1967) this paper focuses on just one and on how it is involved in change. As Blom & Gumperz (1972) have argued, alternate codes within a linguistic repertoire are usually each associated with sub-groups in the community and with certain activities. It has been pointed out that a speaker's choice of code in a particular situation is part of that speaker's linguistic presentation of self. The speaker makes the choice as part of a verbal strategy to identify herself or himself with the social categories and activities the code symbolizes. The choice, then, allows the speaker to express solidarity with that category or group of people. It will be argued here that because codes (in this case languages) are associated with social statuses and activities, changes in language choice can be used by speakers to symbolize changes in their own social status or in their attitudes towards the activities the languages symbolize.

The Meanings of Codes

Although bilingual Oberwarters use both standard and local varieties of German as well as of Hungarian, and although the choice between local and standard features in either language carries meaning in conversation, here we will be concerned only with the symbolically more important alternation between German of any sort (G) and Hungarian of any sort (H).

Today in Oberwart H symbolizes peasant status and is deprecated because peasant status itself is no longer respected. Peasant is used here for a native cultural category that includes all local agriculturalists and carries a negative connotation, at least for young people. Young bilingual workers often say, in Hungarian, that only the old peasants speak Hungarian. There is no contradiction here. The young workers know that they themselves sometimes speak Hungarian and they can report on their language choices accurately. The saying refers not to actual practice but to the association of the Hungarian language with peasant status. All old peasants do speak Hungarian and speak it in more situations than anyone else.

The preferred status for young people is worker, not peasant. The world of work is a totally German-speaking world, and the language itself has come to represent the worker. The peasant parents of young workers often say about their children 'Ü má egisz nimët' (He/she is totally German already).[1] This is not a reference to citizenship, nor to linguistic abilities. Oberwarters consider themselves Austrians, not Germans, and even young people are considered bilingual, often using Hungarian in interactions with elders. The phrase indicates the strong symbolic relationship between the young people's status as workers and the language which they use at work.

German also represents the money and prestige available to those who are employed, but not available to peasants. German therefore carries more prestige than Hungarian. The children of a monolingual German speaker and a bilingual speaker never learn Hungarian, regardless of which parent is bilingual. In addition, while in previous generations the ability simply to speak both German and Hungarian was the goal of Oberwarters, today there is a premium not just on speaking German, but on speaking it without any interference from Hungarian. Parents often boast that in their children's German speech 'Nëm vág bele e madzsar' (The Hungarian doesn't cut into it). That is, passing as a monolingual German speaker is now the aim of young bilingual Oberwarters.

Such general statements about symbolic associations between languages, social statuses and the evaluations of those statuses do not in themselves predict language choice in particular situations. For instance, although H is negatively evaluated by young people it is nevertheless used by them in a number of interactions where, for various reasons, they choose to present themselves as peasants. Besides the values associated with languages, the three factors which must be known in order to predict choices and to describe the changes in these choices are the speaker's age and sex and the nature of the social network in which that speaker habitually interacts.

How Do Language Choice Patterns Change?

In any interaction between bilingual Oberwarters a choice must be made between G and H. While in most situations one or the other language is chosen, there are some interactions in which both appear to be equally appropriate. In such interactions it is impossible to predict which language will be used by which speaker and both are often used within one short exchange. Gumperz (1976) has called this conversational code-switching. When both languages may appropriately be used Oberwarters say

Table 1 Language choice pattern of women

Informant	Age	Social situations (identity of participant)										
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
A	14	H	GH									
B	15	H	GH		G	G	G					
C	25	H	GH		G	G	G			G		
D	27	H	GH	GH	GH	G	G			G		G
E	17	H	H		GH	G	G			G		G
F	39	H	H		H	GH	G	G	G	G		G
G	23	H	H		H	GH	G			G		G
H	40	H	H		H	GH	GH			G		G
I	52	H	H		H	GH	H		GH	G		G
J	40	H	H	H	GH	H		GH	G	G		G
K	35	H	H	H	H	H		GH	G	G		G
L	61	H	H	H	H	H	H	GH	GH	GH	G	G
M	50	H	H		H	H	H	H	GH	H		G
N	60	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	GH	H		G
O	54	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H		G
P	63	H	H		H	H	H	H	H	H	GH	G
Q	64	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	GH	H
R	59	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	GH	H

No. of informants = 18

Scalability = 95.4%

1 = to god
2 = grandparents and their generation
3 = bilingual clients in black market
4 = parents and their generation
5 = friends and age-mate neighbors
6 = brothers and sisters

7 = spouse
8 = children and their generation
9 = bilingual government officials
10 = grandchildren and their generation
11 = doctors

G – German, H – Hungarian, GH – both German and Hungarian.

they are speaking 'ehodzsan dzsün' (as it comes). A description of language choice in such situations must include such variation and in this sense is comparable to the rule conflicts described for syntactic change by Bickerton (1973).

In predicting an individual's choice between the three possibilities – G, H or both – the habitual role-relationship between participants in the interaction proved to be the most important factor. Other aspects of the situation such as locale, purpose or occasion were largely irrelevant. Therefore, specification of the identity of the interlocutor was sufficient to define the social situation for the purposes of the present analysis.

We can think of informants as being ranked along a vertical axis and social situations being arranged along a horizontal axis, as in tables 1 and 2. Note that all

Table 2 Language choice pattern of men

Informant	Age	Social situations (identity of participant)										
		1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*	*8*	*9*	*10*	*11*
A	17	H	GH		G	G	G			G		G
B	25	H	H		GH	G	G			G		G
C	42		H		GH	G	G	G	G	G		G
D	20	H	H	H	H	GH	G	G	G	G		G
E	22	H	H		H	GH	GH			G		G
F	62	H	H	H	H	H	H	GH	GH	GH	G	G
G	63	H	H		H	H	H	H		GH		G
H	64	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	GH	GH		G
I	43	H	H		H	H	H	H	G	H		G
J	41	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	GH	H		H
K	54	H	H		H	H	H	H	H	H		G
L	61	H	H		H	H	H	H	H	G	GH	G
M	74	H	H		H	H	H	H	H	H	GH	H
N	58	G	H		H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H

No. of informants = 14   Scalability = 95.2%

1 = to god
2 = grandparents and their generation
3 = bilingual clients in black market
4 = parents and their generation
5 = friends and age-mate neighbors
6 = brothers and sisters

7 = spouse
8 = children and their generation
9 = bilingual government officials
10 = grandchildren and their generation
11 = doctors

G – German, H – Hungarian, GH – both German and Hungarian.

speakers listed in these tables are bilingual. The information is drawn from a language usage questionnaire which was constructed on the basis of native categories of interlocutors and linguistic resources. Similar scales based on systematic observation of language choice were also constructed. There was a high degree of agreement between observed usage and the questionnaire results (average agreement for men 86%, for women 90%). That is, the questionnaire results were corroborated by direct observation of language choice.

The language choices of a particular informant in all situations are indicated in the rows of tables 1 and 2 and the choices of all informants in a particular situation are indicated in the columns. The choices of Oberwarters, arranged in this way, form a nearly perfect implicational scale. Note that for all speakers there is at least one situation in which they use only H. For almost all speakers there are some situations in which they use both G and H and some in which they use only G.

[. . .]

It is worth considering the factors that determine the place of a speaker on the scale. Two factors determine the degree to which a person uses H as opposed to G: the person's age and her or his social network. Because historical evidence (cf. Imre 1973; Kovács 1942: 73–6) shows that present-day age differences are not due to age-grading of language choice, we can take age (apparent time) as a surrogate for repeated sampling over real time (cf. Labov 1972 for details of this strategy).

Social network is defined here as all the people (contacts) an individual spoke to in the course of a unit of time. The average amount of time for all informants was seven days. Each of these network contacts was assigned to one of two categories: (a) those who lived in households which owned either pigs or cows, (b) those who lived in households which owned neither pigs nor cows. Oberwarters themselves define those who own cows and pigs as peasants. The peasantness of a person's network, expressed as the percentage of contacts who fit into category (a) is, in effect, a measure of that person's social involvement with the category of persons with which the use of H is associated.

The more peasants the individual has in her or his social network the greater the number of social situations in which that individual uses H. In fact, in most cases a *person's own status*, whether peasant, worker or some gradation in between, *was not as accurate a predictor of his or her choices as the status of the person's social contacts*. These results lend support to the notion that social networks are instrumental in constraining speakers' linguistic presentation of self (Gumperz 1964; Labov 1973).

The three-way relationship between language choices, age, and peasantness of social network can be demonstrated by ranking informants on each of the measures and then correlating the rankings with each other.

[. . .]

On the basis of the rank correlations the following brief outline of the synchronic pattern of language choice can be drawn. For the sample as a whole, the more peasants in one's social network the more likely it is that one will use H in a large number of situations. The older one is the more likely it is that one will use H in a large number of situations. Young people who interact only with workers use the least H, older people who interact mostly with peasants use the most H. Older people who associate mostly with workers are closest in their language choices to people much younger than themselves, while very young people who associate mostly with peasants use more H than others their own age.

Because historical evidence rules out the possibility of age-grading and because the sample allows one to disentangle the effects of time and that of networks, it is possible to hypothesize the following process of change. Changes in language choices occur situation by situation. The rule for one situation is always first categorical for the old form (H), then variable (GH), before it is categorical for the new form (G). As speakers' networks become less and less peasant they use H in fewer and fewer situations. And, in a parallel but separate process, as time passes new generations use H in fewer and fewer situations regardless of the content of their social networks.

Differences Between Men and Women

The implicational scales describing choices seem to indicate no differences between men and women. Both men and women show the same kinds of implicational relationships in the same ordered list of situations. However, the rank correlations of language choice, age and peasantness of network present a more complicated picture. Here the issue is whether age and social networks are equally well correlated with language choice for men and women. In fact they are not: for men the correlation between social network and language choice is about the same as the correlation between age and language choice (0.78 and 0.69 respectively). For women age alone is more closely correlated with language choice (0.93) than is the social network measure (0.74). This difference between men and women is significant at the 0.05 level.

In short there is a difference between men and women in the way each is going through the process of change in language choice. If we distinguish three twenty-year generations, separate the men from the women and those with very peasant networks from those with nonpeasant networks, it is possible to illustrate the process at work. Informants' networks ranged from 13% peasant contacts to 94% peasant contacts. This continuum was divided into two parts. All those scoring at or above the median were put in the peasant network category in figure 1, all those scoring below the median were in the nonpeasant network category.

Figure 1 illustrates the fact that for men there is a very regular pattern in the correlations. From the oldest to the youngest generation use of G increases, but for each generation this increase is greatest for those whose social networks include a majority of nonpeasants. Among the men the youngest group as a whole uses less H than any of the others. But those young men with heavily peasant networks do use more H. Regardless of the negative evaluations, for these young men expression of peasant identity is still preferred for many situations.

For women the process is different. First we find that in the oldest generation this sample includes not one person with a nonpeasant network. This is not a sampling error but reflects the limited range of activities, and therefore of social contacts, open to women before World War II. In the middle generation the women's pattern matches that of men exactly. Many women of the generation reaching maturity during and after World War II left the peasant home, if only temporarily, to work in inns, factories and shops. Often they remained in contact with those they befriended. As with the men, those who have heavily peasant networks use more H than those who do not.

The youngest generation of women differs both from the older women and from the men. First, these youngest women use more G and less H than anyone else in the community, including the youngest men. In addition, for these women, *peasantness of social network makes no difference in language choice.* Young women with peasant networks use Hungarian as rarely as young women with nonpeasant networks. Recall that for all the men, including the youngest, peasantness of network did make a difference since it was associated with more use of H.
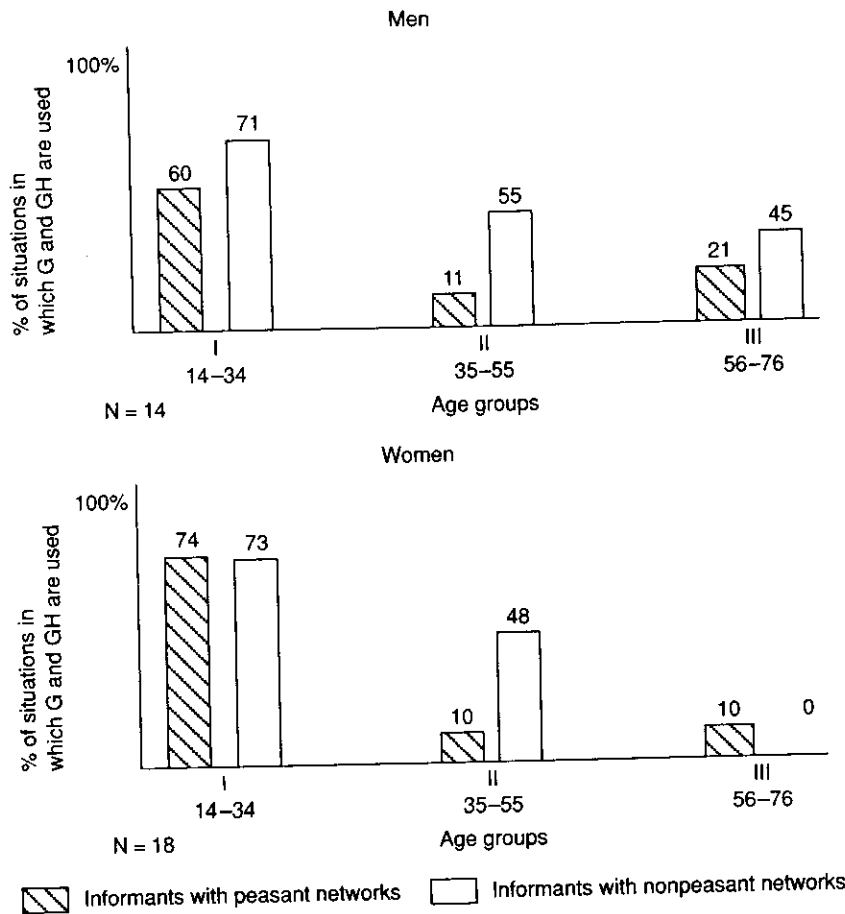
Men

N = 14

Women

N = 18

☒ Informants with peasant networks ☐ Informants with nonpeasant networks

Figure 1 Percentage of G and GH language choices of informants with peasant and nonpeasant social networks in three age groups

To understand these differences it is necessary to go back to the activities from which the languages derive their meanings and evaluations. For the most recent generation of women, peasant life is a much less attractive choice than it is for men. Now that other opportunities are open to these young women, they reject peasant life as a viable alternative. It will be argued here that their language choices are part of this rejection.

There are some young men who, despite a general preference for industrial and commercial employment, want to take over family farms. Some of these young men have the newly developing attitude that farming can be an occupation, a 'Beruf', like any other. These are men whose families own enough land to make agriculture if not as lucrative as wage work at least a satisfactory livelihood. In contrast, young women, since World War II, have not been willing to take over the family farm when this opportunity is offered to them. More importantly, they specifically state that they do

not want to marry peasant men. The life of a peasant wife is seen by Oberwart young women as particularly demeaning and difficult when compared to the other choices which have recently become available to them.

Let us compare the choices open to Oberwart young men and women as they see them. For men the life possibilities are (a) to be an industrial or construction worker (usually a commuter coming home only on weekends), (b) to be a peasant-worker, holding two full-time jobs, and (c) to be a full-time agriculturalist. This last is felt by Oberwart men to have the advantage of independence – no orders from strangers – and the disadvantage of lack of cash and prestige. But it is generally agreed that while agricultural work was once more grueling and difficult than factory and construction work, this is no longer the case. Although peasant men still work longer hours than those in industry, machines such as the tractor and the combine make men's farm work highly mechanized and considerably less difficult than it once was.

For women the life possibilities depend mainly on whom they marry. The peasant wife typically spends the day doing farm work: milking, feeding pigs, hoeing, plant-ing and harvesting potatoes and a few other rootcrops. Her evenings are spent doing housework. Industriousness is traditionally considered a young peasant wife's most valuable quality.

There are machines now available which lighten the work of the peasant wife considerably, including the washing machine, the electric stove and the silo (which eliminates the need for rootcrops as cattle feed). But in peasant households the male labor saving machines are always acquired before any of the ones which lighten women's work. For instance the silo, which is perhaps the most substantial work saver for the peasant wife, is never built before a combine is purchased, and the combine itself is among the last and most expensive of the machines acquired. In this Oberwart exemplifies the pattern all over Europe, where, for instance, the German small peasant's wife in 1964 averaged over the year seventeen more work hours per week than her husband (Franklin 1969: 37–44). In addition, although peasant life in Oberwart is less male-dominated than, for instance, in the Balkans (compare Denich 1974 with Fél & Hofer 1969: 113–44), nevertheless for the peasant wife the independence which is said to compensate the peasant man for his work is not freely available. In fact, being a young peasant wife often means living under the authority of a mother-in-law who supervises the kitchen and women's farm work generally.

In marked contrast, marriage to a worker involves only household tasks and upkeep of a kitchen garden. Wives of workers are sometimes employed as maids or salespersons, but mostly they hold part-time jobs or are not employed at all. Because of the increased access to money, because agricultural equipment is not needed and because some of the women themselves contribute part of the money, electric stoves and washing machines are among the first appliances bought by working married couples, thereby further lightening the wife's work load. Peasant wives work far more than peasant men. Peasant men work more hours than worker men. Workers' wives, especially if not employed, often work fewer hours than their husbands.

Table 3 Endogamous marriages of all bilingual Oberwarters and bilingual male peasant Oberwarters

	% Endogamous marriages of all marriages	% Endogamous marriages of male peasants
1911–40	71%	87%
1941–60	65	54
1961–72	32	0

Source: Marriage Register, City of Oberwart.

This contrast is not lost on young Oberwart women. When discussing life choices they especially dwell on the dirtyness and heaviness of peasant work. Rejection of the use of local Hungarian, the symbol of peasant status, can be seen as part of the rejection, by young women, of peasant status and life generally. They do not want to be peasants; they do not present themselves as peasants in speech.

Mothers of marriageable daughters specifically advise them against marriage to peasants. Oberwarters agree that 'Paraszt legin nëm kap nüöt' (Peasant lads can't get women). For instance, in reference to a particular young couple an old man remarked: 'Az e Trüumfba jár, az fog neki tehen szart lapáni? Abbu má paraszt nëm lesz, az má zicher!' (She works at the [local bra factory], *she*'s going to shovel cow manure for him? She'll never be a peasant, that's for sure.) Although the young men themselves are usually also reluctant to become peasants, for those who nevertheless choose family agriculture as their livelihood, the anti-peasant attitudes of the community's young women present a problem.

If in recent years Oberwart young women have not wanted to marry peasant men, and if they have acted on this preference, then Oberwart peasant men must have found wives elsewhere. The town's marriage records should provide evidence for the difference in attitudes between young men and young women.

The general trend in Oberwart in the post-war years has been away from the traditional village endogamy and towards exogamy. For instance, table 3 shows that between 1911 and 1940 71% of the marriages of bilinguals in Oberwart were endogamous. Between 1961 and 1972 only 32% were. But for the bilingual peasant men of Oberwart the figures are different. As table 3 indicates, between 1911 and 1940 a larger percentage of peasant men married endogamously than all bilingual Oberwarters (87%). Between 1941 and 1960, however, this was reversed. Finally, by 1961–72, when 32% of all bilingual Oberwarters married endogamously, not one peasant man married endogamously. Those peasant men who did marry during those years found wives in the neighboring small German monolingual villages where being a peasant wife has not been negatively valued. In short, the marriage records provide evidence that young Oberwart women's stated attitudes towards peasant men have been translated into action. The effect of this is discussed below.

Conclusion

There are two ways, one direct and one indirect, in which the attitudes and choices of young bilingual women are changing the language usage pattern in this community. Directly, the young women, even those with heavily peasant networks refuse, in most situations, to present themselves as peasants by using H. This contrasts with the language choices of older women and has the general effect that more German is used in more interactions in the community. It also contrasts with the choices of young men, who use Hungarian in more interactions than the young women and who are constrained by the peasantness of their social networks so that those with heavily peasant networks choose local Hungarian in more interactions than those with non-peasant networks.

Indirectly, young women's marriage preferences are also having a linguistic effect. They refuse to marry local peasant men, preferring workers instead. As a result, exactly that small group of young men most likely to be using Hungarian in many situations, that is the ones engaged in peasant agriculture, are the ones who have married German monolingual women with the greatest frequency in the last decade or so. Because the children of marriages between monolingual German speakers and bilingual Hungarian–German speakers in Oberwart rarely if ever learn Hungarian, in an indirect way the present generation of young women is limiting the language possibilities of the next generation.

In exploring the reasons for the difference between young men's and young women's language choices, evidence was presented showing that in their stated attitudes and their marriage choices the women evaluate peasant life more negatively than the men and reject the social identity of peasant wife. The women of Oberwart feel they have more to gain than men by embracing the new opportunities of industrial employment. Also, considering the male-dominated nature of East European peasant communities generally and the lives of Oberwart women in particular, women have less to lose in rejecting the traditional peasant roles and values.

This paper has argued that women's language choices and their linguistic innovativeness in this community are the linguistic expressions of women's greater participation in social change. The linguistic pattern is best understood by considering the social meanings of the available languages and the strategic choices and evaluations which men and women make concerning the ways of life symbolized by those languages.

1   The orthography is a modified version of Imre (1971) and of the Hungarian dialect atlas.

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