

Thematic Article

Linguistic Socialization and Identity in Ethnic Hungarian Deaf Families in Romania

Emese Belényi¹, Gábor Flóra²

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Abstract

Ethnic minority Deaf people form a social group whose members often share complex and multiple cultural backgrounds. This research explores linguistic socialization and identity development in ethnic Hungarian Deaf families living in a multi-cultural region of Romania, examining the identity related aspects of the family formation and the transmission of identity to children in ethnically homogenous (Hungarian) or heterogeneous (Hungarian-Romanian) families founded by Deaf spouses. Methodologically the research is based on survey among members of the ethnic Hungarian Deaf community in Bihor County and their ethnic Romanian spouses, career interviews with Hungarian Deaf Special School graduates and family case studies of two or three generation Deaf families. The research results reveal that the ethnic homogeneity of Deaf family partners is a key factor in handing down to children the Hungarian ethnic-national identity and the Hungarian sign language / oral language knowledge. The research findings also highlight the fact that within family interactions involving three generations where Deaf and hearing, ethnic minority and ethnic majority family members are present, specific, multifaceted communication models may prevail, and pathways and modes of identity transmission with particular characteristics may occur.

Keywords: ethnic minority; Deaf; family language use; linguistic socialization; deaf culture; identity

Introduction

From a sociological and anthropological perspective, deafness, unlike other types of disability, functions as a linguistic-cultural community-building factor. The Deaf community is not only a group of people with disabilities, but also a linguistic-cultural community (Marschark et al. 2017, Higgins and Liberman 2016), whose members use sign language as their primary means of communication. Members of Deaf community form a closed community structure in terms defined by Coleman (1988). “Everything that cannot be obtained individually becomes available to those who belong to the structure. If an individual leaves the structure, it can harm others (as it breaks the chain of information, trust and social control), but also himself” (Pusztai 2015: 152).

Similarly to the hearing society, the internal structure of the Deaf community is not homogeneous; its members can have different backgrounds, family languages and cultural affiliations (Leigh and Crowe 2015). From the homogenizing linguistic-cultural perspective of the ethnic-national majority, the use of minority languages might act as a disadvantage-generating factor (O’Neill 2013). In this context, linguistic identity of ethnic minority Deaf people may be threatened both due to their ethnic minority community membership within the larger society and within the ethnically heterogeneous Deaf community, where they also find themselves in a minority situation.

The notion of bilingualism, when referring to the linguistic-cultural needs of the ethnic-national minority Deaf learners, may be misleading (Ohna 2003), as they are in fact in a situation of dual bilingualism. In this context, the linguistic and cultural diversity of Deaf learners can be efficiently incorporated into educational strategies to promote their education and social inclusion by acknowledging that Deaf learners,

¹ Partium Christian University; belenyi.emese@partium.ro (corresponding author)

² Partium Christian University; flora.gabor@partium.ro

similarly to hearing learners can have different backgrounds, family languages and cultural affiliations, and everyone has a fundamental right to live their identity under favorable conditions (Leigh and Crowe 2015).

From a linguistic-cultural perspective, in the condition of the homogenizing policies of the ethnic-national majority, minority language usage appears to be a disadvantaging factor (O'Neill 2013). It is no coincidence, therefore, that in countries or regions having a clear linguistic-cultural majority, assisting institutions and their representatives tend to support the "child's interests" in favor of the culture and language of the majority. A research in the United States has shown that the Spanish parents of Deaf children there typically received the advice of using only English language combined with sign language in their communication with their children. In Australia, according to 2014 research results, English is also dominant in the communication relationship between ethnic minority parents and their deaf children. Parents who use only English in family communication typically feel that this language provides the most favorable conditions for their linguistic, cognitive, social, emotional development and professional experience (Crowe et al., 2014).

In contrast, another research exploring the same issue in the multicultural regions of Spain (Guiberson 2013) has produced different results. 50% of the parents surveyed in the research have received a statement from a counselor who advises them to communicate with their child in more than one language, and the proportion of those advised not to do so is only 36%. This supports the fact that the institutional support of multicultural regions provides more favorable conditions for the diversity of ethnic-linguistic identities within the Deaf population. Nevertheless, although many parents believe that multilingualism is accessible and useful to their children in practice, only a few Deaf children actually become multilingual.

For children growing up in a minority culture, whether hearing or Deaf, their natural need is to incorporate the cultural heritage of their family of origin into their own identity. To achieve this, there are many tools for hearing children and young people born into a national minority family: the religion of their own national community, their institutions, their family ties and human ties. However, Deaf children born to national minority hearing families rarely have access to these community cultural resources due to the communication barriers separating them from their family of origin (Ahmad et al 2000). Still, it remains a viable option for them to integrate into the majority national Deaf culture, but the effects of this integration are also controversial: although it is undoubtedly offering them extra opportunity for education and social mobility and the opportunity to live positively of deafness as a state of mind, yet it removes them from their own ethnic origin culture, their language, their traditions.

This research explores the link between linguistic socialization and identity development in ethnic Hungarian Deaf families living in a national minority situation in Bihor County, a multicultural region in the Western part of Romania. We start from the assumption that when making marital choices, the most important criteria used by Deaf are the knowledge of sign language and the shared Deaf cultural identity of the partners, which ensure the possibility of smooth communication of sign language communication within the family (Moiser 1999: 9). However, in terms of the chances of preserving and transmitting national identity within the family, there is a significant difference between ethnically homogeneous (Hungarian) and heterogeneous (Hungarian-Romanian) marriages. Within homogeneous Hungarian families, the transmission of Hungarian identity and Hungarian sign language / oral language knowledge - combined with the components of Deaf culture - is a natural and usually undisturbed process, in which (mostly hearing) grandparents can sometimes play a role. In contrast, the survival and transmission of Hungarian national-linguistic identity within ethnically heterogeneous families is much more uncertain and vulnerable.

Research design and Methods

In the course of research, we sought answers to the following questions:

1. What is the role of sign language cultural identity and ethnicity in choosing a spouse?
2. How does communication take place in ethnically homogeneous and ethnically heterogeneous marriages? What is the role and weight of the use of Romanian sign language and Hungarian sign language, as well as of Romanian and Hungarian oral language (articulation) in communication between spouses?
3. What methods of communication do Deaf parents use with their children? In addition to the legacy of sign language and Deaf culture, what ethnic-national identity heritage does the child receive?

The researched population is made up of Deaf persons who cumulate the following characteristics: 1. Are residents of Bihor County; 2. Are of adult age (18 years or older); 3. At least one parent is tied to the Hungarian national-ethnic community; 4. In their case, at least one of the following conditions of belonging to Deaf culture

/ Deaf community is met: membership of the Association of the Deaf; graduation from special school for Deaf; Deaf parent(s); membership of religious congregations for Deaf.

Over the research, the following methods and techniques have been applied:

Questionnaire based survey among members of the ethnic Hungarian Deaf community in Bihor County and their ethnic Romanian spouses. The surveyed population included 111 subjects, of which 89 are ethnic Hungarians and 22 Romanian spouses. The survey included all recorded and active ethnic Hungarian members of the Deaf community who could be reached.

Table 1. Distribution of surveyed population according to ethnic identity and family of origin ethnic background

Ethnic identity of respondents	Hearing parents in ethnically homogenous marriage	Hearing parents in ethnically heterogeneous marriage	Deaf parents in ethnically homogenous marriage	Deaf parents in ethnically heterogeneous marriage	Total
Hungarians	81	1	3	4	89
Romanian spouses	20	-	2	-	22
Total	101	1	5	4	111

Career interviews with ethnic Hungarian Deaf individuals and their ethnic Romanian spouses (30 persons) in order to reveal their deeper motives and personal ways of reaching life-shaping decisions, the subjective means of experiencing key events occurred in one's life, and their influence on education, language use and identity. The typological criterion used in the selection of interview subjects has been the ethnic homogeneity/heterogeneity of marriages. The analysis also includes the ethnic Romanian partners within heterogeneous marriages, so we established three categories of subjects:

C1 ethnic Hungarians in homogenous marriages (with Hungarian partners) or with no partner

C2 ethnic Hungarians in heterogeneous marriages (with Romanian partners)

C3 ethnic Romanian spouses

Family case studies, in order to allow the tracing of language learning, language use, and identity transfer within the family in a greater time horizon and its analysis in connection to the external factors and internal changes influencing family life.

In the selection of the families for the three generations family case studies, in addition to the already mentioned ethnic homogeneity/heterogeneity criterion, we also took into consideration the variety of communication cultures within the family. According to this latter typology we selected families from the following categories:

CS1 three-generational Deaf families

CS2 families where the grandparents and the children are Deaf, while the parents are hearing

CS3 families where the grandparents and the children are hearing, while the parents are Deaf

Results

Identity and communication within the family

Research results confirm that in addition to the family, the Deaf community is the primary living space of Deaf people, and also the most likely social environment for spouse selection. The primary aspect in choosing a spouse is to have a shared sign language cultural identity. The Deaf people included in our research sample chose a spouse exclusively from members of the Deaf community who used sign language, despite some statements of our interviewees that in more than one case their hearing parents tried to dissuade them from this:

K. M. His parents did not interfere in his marriage, but his wife's parents did, because they did not support her in her decision to choose a Deaf partner: they hoped to have a hearing granddaughter. They were afraid of a recurrence of the Deaf generation.

P. S. Her father stated that she should not come into contact with a Deaf boy who communicates only in sign language, and asked that if she chose a hearing-impaired husband, he should at least be able to speak.

Most of the interviewed Deaf people first met at the special school and kept in touch after graduating from school. Others were brought together by the existence of a religious community for the Deaf, or in many cases they became acquainted with the programs of the Association of the Deaf and then stayed together:

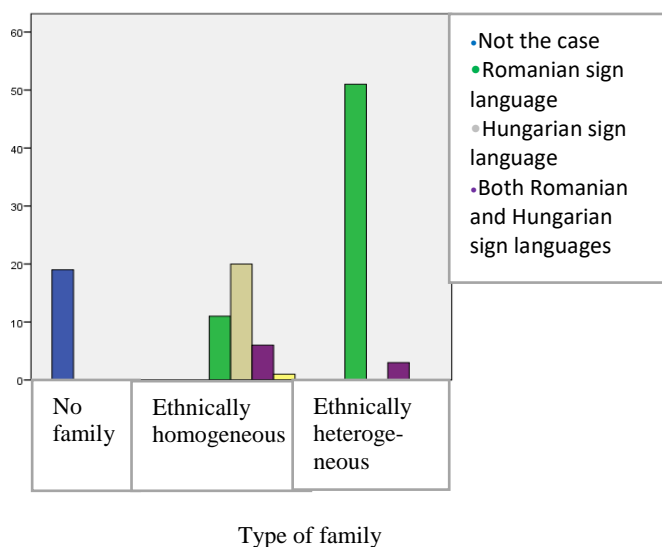
I.D. *"When I visited Piatra Neamț with a delegation from the Deaf Baptist Church in Oradea, the Deaf Baptist Church there, I first met my current wife."*

H. K. *"I finished school, started working, and then started going to the club for the Deaf. Not at first, but later I found a partner there."*

L. F. *He met his wife at a New Year's Eve party in Brăila. They went together to the local Deaf community for a year, then they got married, and their son was born after two years. His wife grew up in a hearing family, but she became part of the Deaf culture from an early school age. At the age of two, she lost most of her hearing due to medication, attended a school for the hearing impaired in Galați, finished the tenth grade here, and then continued for 3 years at a special vocational school in Iași. So she got in touch with the Deaf community, sign language, early on.*

In the case of the Deaf population studied, research results show that similarly to the sociological situation of hearing families, in an ethnically mixed environment the numerically dominant national sign language in the settlement or region is likely to become the language of communication within an ethnically mixed family. This is reflected in the data in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Languages of communication with spouses used within the family, Source: survey among the members of Deaf community (N=111)



According to our research results, ethnically mixed marriages occur with a high frequency within the studied Deaf community. The presumed reasons for this phenomenon are related to the integrating role of Deaf culture and sign language communication, as well as the fact that after graduating from the Hungarian-speaking, ethnically homogeneous special school community the primary community environment of Hungarian Deaf people will be the ethnically heterogeneous vocational school and the local Deaf communities.

As we can see from Figure 1, if one of the spouses is Romanian, the language of sign language communication within the family is likely to be Romanian sign language, which is also typically the language of communication within the ethnically mixed local Deaf community. Still, it is noteworthy that in a significant proportion of families where one language dominates, children more or less learn and occasionally use the other language as well.

N.L. *knows the Hungarian sign language, he can pick it up at any time, but he cannot express himself orally in Hungarian, only in Romanian. His father communicates with N.L.'s spouse in an unaccompanied Romanian sign language, because he studied in school Hungarian sign language with a Hungarian oral accompaniment, i.e. the sound training classes were held in Hungarian. That is, in his mother tongue. As a result, the two sign languages are associated in such a way that the Hungarian-born partner incorporates into his sign language communication with his child the Hungarian signs accompanied by the Hungarian oral language acquired during the special school training in Hungarian. This process is simpler, so to speak, spontaneous, compared to the internal communication of hearing spouses in ethnically mixed marriages.*

Deaf parents mostly communicate with their Deaf family members in sign language, sometimes accompanied by oral speech. However, in the case of those living in an ethnically heterogeneous Deaf marriage, contact with the hearing family members of the wider family is limited by the absence of a proper communication channel.

K. S. *In his extended family, he communicates with his father and brother in sign language, and with his mother in sign language accompanied by oral speech (articulation). His mother-in-law did not learn to write text messages, so her contact with her parents in law from Brăila is limited.*

In the same time, the identity defined by sign language, Deaf culture and the related modes of communication, especially the use of sign language, are of primary importance, also in ethnically heterogeneous (Hungarian-Romanian) marriages, even if none of the spouses had a smooth path to finding Deaf culture and community.

B.L. *In his case, the father is Hungarian and the mother is Romanian. The father came from a hearing family and the mother was of Romanian ethnicity and grew up in Deaf culture as a child of hearing-impaired parents. The children of the couple, although the mother was Romanian, studied in special education in Hungarian in Cluj-Napoca, the girl for 8 years and the boy for 6 years. The next stage of their further education was the Romanian special grammar school, where the little boy joined his 8th grade sister as a 6th grader. In their case, the language of communication within the family was divided between the oral national mother tongues of the parents and the mixed sign language developed during the shared life of the two parents.*

Thus, a new communication sign system is formed within the family, which carries the special features of that family. Most signs have been learned and used over the years in their communication with other Deaf peers, of both ethnicities.

Cross-generational transmission of identity within the family

In families founded by Deaf partners, the transmission of sign language and oral language identity to hearing children shows interesting features. During career interviews, it was noticeable that if a Deaf couple with hearing parents were born with a hearing child, Deaf parents could experience it as a kind of relief, liberation, a kind of “rehabilitation” across generations, even if they otherwise feel good about Deaf culture itself.

Hearing grandparents often play a key role in the upbringing of their hearing grandchild (Nybo et al. 1998), which means that the child learns and feels both the communication methods of oral culture and Deaf culture and thus becomes able to communicate effectively with all ascending family members (parents, grandparents), communicate in a way that the family member feels most at home with. When there is no other hearing family member (grandmother, sibling) available, Deaf parents may consider it important that in this case a close educational relationship develops with a hearing - even distant - relative or friend.

D.R. *"When my son was born, it was thanks to the presence of my sister that she heard live speech and learned sign language with us parallel to communicating orally with my sister."*

The research results suggest a constant interaction of the languages of bilingual individuals when they are exposed to both (or more) languages at the same time. The hearing child learns oral language (s) primarily from hearing grandparents, and sign language(s) from Deaf parents. Thus, within such a family, a complex and multifaceted communication code system develops / operates, and this is experienced naturally by the family members.

A.Z. *When the 3 months passed, her mother had to go back to work, so six days a week the grandmother supervised the toddler, she taught her to speak, the mother only took her home on Saturdays. The communication within the family took place in the following way: **within the grandmother's family**: oral method, namely in Hungarian: also with her granddaughter and her Deaf daughter. The grandfather used the same method. Deaf extended family members have little contact with their son-in-law due to their deficiencies in Romanian language skills. The **interviewee** communicates with her hearing child in Hungarian sign language and in Hungarian oral language. The **child's father** communicates with his hearing child in Romanian sign language and in oral Romanian. The **hearing child** communicates with his mother in oral Hungarian language or sign language, with his father in Romanian oral language and sign language. The **Deaf father of Romanian descent** does not know either the Hungarian oral language or the Hungarian sign language. The spouses communicate with each other in Romanian sign language and Romanian oral language.*

The role of the presence of communication situations similar to those described above in strengthening multiculturalism within the family is undoubtedly influencing the experience and development of identity within the family. Nevertheless, as can be seen from the data in Figures 2 and 3, research results show that in Hungarian ethnically homogeneous Deaf Hungarian families, Hungarian sign language and oral language

identity is more likely to be inherited by the hearing children compared to ethnically heterogeneous (Hungarian-Romanian) families, where Romanian identity has better chances to prevail.

Figure 2. Languages of oral speech with hearing children in ethnically homogenous/heterogeneous families (N=111)
Source: survey among the members of Deaf community

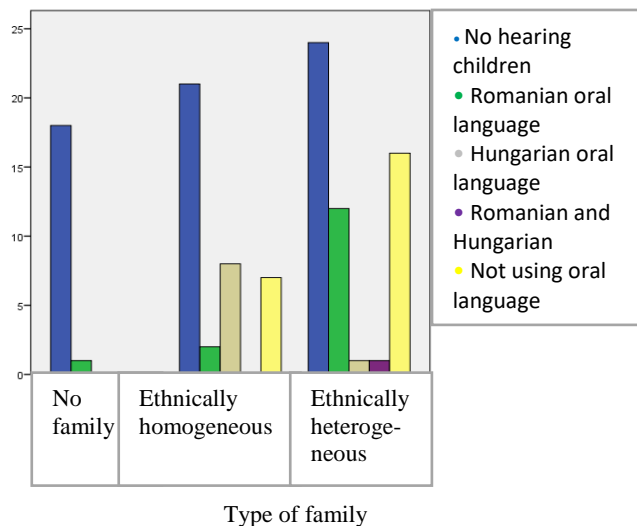
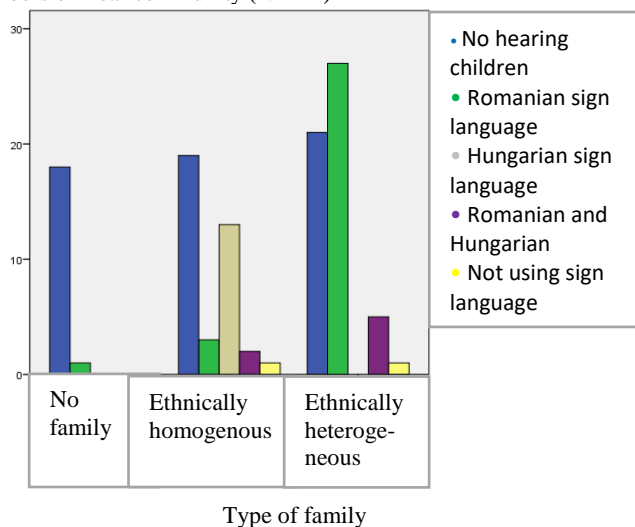


Figure 3. Languages of signing with hearing children in ethnically homogenous/heterogeneous families
Source: survey among the members of Deaf community (N=111)



The narratives of our interviewees revealed that parents, but also Deaf grandparents, tend to welcome the fact that Deaf culture is passed on to the generation of grandchildren in the family. Hearing members of the wider family, on the other hand, are more likely to engage in rejection behaviour, they want at least their grandchild to be hearing.

L.D. When his son was born and found to be Deaf as well, he was not grieved, and even his parents and his wife were especially happy, and even felt pride that the child is like them. He confessed that he was afraid of the alienation that would have existed if the child had heard. He was greeted with love by his father-in-law, only his mother-in-law (his wife's hearing mother) was annoyed by the deafness of her grandson.

In the case of hearing children, ethnically homogeneous Hungarian Deaf families have a better chance of passing on Hungarian sign language identity to Deaf children. However, there are also examples of ethnically heterogeneous marriages, where the Hungarian side strives - more or less successfully - to pass on its mother tongue identity - primarily in its sign language form - to the next generation.

H. I. *"My wife and I sign in Hungarian at home, but my daughter C. and her mother are already signing in Romanian; however I insist that when communicating with me she accompany orally the Romanian sign language in Hungarian."*

In some cases, a multicultural family model where the gender of the child is the deciding factor may prevail in the choice of school for Deaf children born in ethnically heterogeneous Deaf families.

K. I. and K. E. *are Deaf parents living in heterogeneous marriages who raised three Deaf children: two boys and one girl. The father, who was born into a hearing family of Hungarian ethnicity, attended the Hungarian-language special school for the Deaf in Cluj-Napoca for 8 years before starting the Romanian-language vocational school. When the children reached the age to go to school, their daughter, like her mother, was enrolled in special primary education in Romanian, while their sons were enrolled in the Hungarian-language Deaf school in Cluj-Napoca. When asked about the drivers of this decision, their answer revealed that, for example, the father wanted to pass on his own sense of home to his sons. "... I had a good time there; they were kind, patient teachers. I thought it would be good for the boys, they teach well, honestly." In this family, the girl who was educated in Romanian chose a Deaf partner of Romanian ethnicity while one boy has a Hungarian Deaf wife (the other boy was not married).*

Discussion

According to the instrumentalist theory of identity, ethnic groups and subjects are able to move away from their ethnic status according to the requirements of the social situation and shift in the expression of ethnic identity depending on circumstances and challenges. In the identity construct of subjects assembled into a dynamic structure, several identities are present at the same time (Young 1976) and "at certain times a certain special identity is given a primary role" (Bell 1975:159).

A study of mixed marriages formed of hearing spouses (Flóra & Szilágyi 2008: 146) found that in addition to the close connection between national and linguistic identity, language use may also have a certain self-regulation and autonomy, which can be more pronounced when there is a relative equilibrium in the expression of the cultural affiliation of married people. The desire for multicultural coexistence within the family is reflected in the cases where both languages are used within the family. In a special way, this desire is illustrated also by the so called "mixed languages", special communication codes developed and used within the family, which incorporate elements of the native languages of both partners.

It is also noteworthy that in a significant proportion of hearing families where one language dominates, children more or less learn and occasionally use the other language as well. In such circumstances, a multicultural environment can have effects that both parents and children can experience as benefits. These include the possibility of learning the language of both spouses as a mother tongue in the family, the possibility of direct family contact with the two ethnic-linguistic communities, the resulting greater degree of flexibility, tolerance, adaptability.

Our research results suggest that the chances of developing the above mentioned equilibrium situations are also significant in the communication environment formed by Deaf spouses and their children and close relatives who have established an ethnically mixed family within Deaf culture. In families where the heterogeneity of the spouses' family-backgrounds is combined with the communication modes of Deaf culture, complex, multifaceted communication situations can develop where there is a high chance of a kind of dynamic balance of different linguistic-cultural identities. Macnamara (1966) recommends a two-switch model of bilingual functioning to describe this phenomenon. According to this model, a bilingual or multilingual individual decides independently which language he wants to speak and can make his coding system operational in that language as a result of the decision.

Research conducted in Transylvania revealed that in mixed marriages established by hearing family members, the transmission of Hungarian identity within the family can be significantly influenced by the fact whether the parents live in a homogeneous Hungarian or in a mixed marriage. In mixed marriages both parties bring different worlds with different traditions and customs. In the case of such marriages, what matters is the strength of the spouses' identity, but also the attitudes determined by the parties' personality traits, whether they are a dominant or rather a "submissive" type (Sallay 2010:125).

The results of our research confirm that similarly to the ethnically mixed families between hearing partners, the preservation and transmittance of Hungarian minority ethnic-national identity within Deaf families is much more insecure compared to the ethnically homogeneous Hungarian families. At the same time, we have found that the characteristics of mixed marriages which have mapped the relationships of the hearing society do not

fully fit into the Deaf community, even if the question remains as to which particular national form “prevails” within the common sign language identity, or what compromise may be reached as a result of the “struggle” of the two national languages and cultures within the family. There is greater openness to ethnically mixed marriages in the Deaf community than in the hearing society, as these marriages are perceived as homogeneous by Deaf spouses from the perspective of the Deaf culture that has their primary identity-creating function.

In Deaf culture, not the audible language that characterize the majority society, but the visually perceptible sign language is the decisive mode of communication, which combines spouses into a cultural unit transcending ethnic borders. In such circumstances, a multicultural environment can have effects that both parents and children might experience as benefits. These include the possibility of learning the language of both spouses as a mother tongue in the family, the possibility of direct family contact with the two ethnic-linguistic communities, and the resulting greater degree of flexibility, tolerance, and adaptability.

Conclusions

To sum it all up, the research results both confirm and enrich the scientific information value of our assumption in important respects. It was confirmed that in the case of people living in homogeneous marriages the transmission of Hungarian identity, Hungarian sign language / oral language knowledge - combined with the components of Deaf culture - is a natural and usually undisturbed process, in which (mostly hearing) grandparents can sometimes play a role. If, on the other hand, one of the spouses is Romanian, the language of communication within the Deaf culture will probably be the Romanian sign language / oral language, which is typically also the language of interethnic communication within the Deaf community.

The results of the research also highlight the fact that the communication situation and the process of identity transmission can become particularly complicated in intergenerational interactions (including grandparents, parents and children) in large family environments where Deaf and hearing, national majority and national minority identities family members are both present. Special attention should be paid in this respect to multi-generational and ethnically heterogeneous Deaf families, where - while cultural linguistic assimilation can also be present as a trend - special linguistic and cultural enrichment and striving for cultural-linguistic balance can also be observed.

Considering the issues discussed as a solution strategy, the need to ensure the right and real opportunity for mother tongue education is strongly raised. In the light of the fact that learners belonging to minority ethnic communities are members of the Deaf community with the same rights as their Deaf peers with majority ethnicity, in addition to the minority family oral language used by students, their educational linguistic rights and opportunities must be extended to the minority sign language(s) they use. In the case of Romania, this would presuppose the establishment of a school network (from kindergarten to secondary school) where, in addition to learning Romanian sign language/oral language, pupils have the opportunity to learn communication tools expressing and strengthening their Hungarian identity (Hungarian sign language as well as the oral language), both in the classroom and in the community outside.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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