

Personal Statement

2015, Linguistics, Christ's College (pooled to Jesus College)

Two nomadic tribesmen meet in the Eurasian Steppes. This is not the first line of a joke, but rather a highly intriguing setting of a widespread linguistic phenomenon, borrowing. As vocabularies are exchanged, loanwords start their often long career, which sometimes only ends in far-off lands. For instance, show me the ancient Iranian shepherd who had the faintest idea that his word for entrenchment would be used in the future by Finno-Ugrian (“város”), Romance (“oraş”) and Slavic speakers (“varoš”) to indicate settlements far more developed than anything ever built in his age.

It is not by chance that as a Hungarian I have become interested in how languages are being shaped by getting in connection with one another. This is because my mother tongue is affected by different dialects to a great extent, as this Uralic language got located in an Indo-European ocean after an adventurous trail through Turkish and Iranian speakers. Consequently, language families and areal features always grab my interest. There is an invaluable example for the latter, the Balkan sprachbund, where the proximity of languages of vastly different origins has invoked quite a few common features. Many of them attach articles to the end of the nouns, while the case system has virtually disappeared, with the exception of the Serbo-Croatian morphology (and the agglutinative Turkish). Many languages in the sprachbund share phonemes, such as the schwa (both in Albanian and Romanian).

I am also fascinated by interactions between phonemes, like how rules for consonant assimilation vary in different languages. For instance, when the last consonant of a stem and the first consonant of a suffix differ in their voicedness, the first of the two sounds tends to assimilate in Hungarian (kéz[kez]+től [kestøl], but mész[mes]+be [mezbe]), in contrast with English, where the same rule has a forward direction (cake+s, but bag+s).

I studied Italian for two years, which gave me an insight to a new language, surprising me with a notable similarity between its phonetic system and that of Hungarian, such as their articulation, which makes vowels pronounced clearer compared to English. My Latin studies gave me ideas about how languages change over time. For instance, I attempted to observe the morphology of nouns becoming less complex in Italian than in Latin, with other elements inevitably appearing to replace the disappearing cases.

I consider my 13-pages essay on bilingualism and language shift to be my highest accomplishment in linguistics so far. It is based on surveys and research Miklós Kontra has conducted with Hungarian immigrants living in America and Judit Navracsić's study on bilingualism. Not only have I defined the latter following Grosjean in contrast to Bloom, but I have also observed interferences between dialects of Eastern European immigrants and English in morphology, syntax, phonetics and even vocabulary.

Additionally, I assume my participation in the Comenius Programme has enhanced my language, lecturing and problem solving skills. It has been an international project organising meetings, for example, in Italy, where I spent two weeks in a foreign environment studying

the European economy. I had to present a Hungarian entrepreneur to a great number of students from Finland to Spain, which was a great opportunity to practice these skills.

To sum up, Cambridge University would be the most suitable place for me, since this school matches up qualified tutors with aspiring students and provides a great environment for researching new theories and ideas. Also, graduates of Cambridge are the best in their field, which is what I am trying to achieve myself, as I would like to study linguistics with this enthusiasm in a university environment which is challenging and rewarding as well. I believe that while I would improve my knowledge on linguistics generally, I would also benefit from the different, open atmosphere of academic education in Britain.