

Responsibility



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Power and responsibility. Reflections on the purpose of research

János Imre Heltai

This article addresses the question of what the research we are conducting in Tiszavasvári is for, and, more broadly, what the purpose of sociolinguistic research is. The short answer to this is very simple: to improve people's relationships with one another and to serve humanity (Oliver–Dovchin 2024: 34). We serve humanity when we contribute to ensuring that as many people as possible live well and as few as possible live poorly. The main point about this, however, is not how much money we have, that is, not our material realities, but rather the overall quality of life. It includes questions such as what people's special talents are, what freedom they have, and the opportunities available to them. According to Christian teaching, for example, a person lives well when they are obedient to God and treat their fellow human beings with love. In the language of sociolinguistics, we might say that a good life, or the quality of life, depends on the relationships of power and responsibilities that people are embedded in. The term “power” is not intended to mean here something inherently bad; rather, it means that someone has the opportunity and ability to influence their fellow human beings' life and actions. Power also entails responsibility. For example, we can say that we have the power to do good, or that parents, for instance, have both power and responsibility when raising their children. However, power can be abused if it is not accompanied by responsibility

for others. According to Emmanuel Levinas (2006[1972]), a philosopher frequently cited in contemporary sociolinguistics, we can become ethical human beings only if we strive to “see” the face of the fundamentally unknowable Other. In doing so, we recognize their vulnerability and feel a sense of responsibility toward them. In a similar vein, the Hungarian educator and philosopher Sándor Karácsony emphasizes that it is key to respect the autonomy of the other person, and a precondition of this is to turn towards the Other (1938[2010]). We must use the power we have without abusing it, that is, we must not harm those who are vulnerable in one way or other (such as the elderly, the poor, or those less educated than ourselves), but rather protect them. Karácsony’s idea about the difference between equality of rights and equality of status illustrates this; although he articulates it in the context of education, it can be applied to various human relationships.

“Children are not adults’ equals but they have equal rights with them. A child is not to be mistaken for an imperfect or underdeveloped adult; a child is a fully developed, and therefore perfect, toddler, or young child child, or early adolescent, or teenager. Young children, early adolescents, and teenagers have the full right and perfect autonomy to live their own lives. No adult has the right to dictatorially impose their own adult life upon them” (Karácsony 2011[1945]: 31).

Karácsony uses the term “rank” with reference to social status, that is, our place in society. Rank, in his view, cannot be earned; rather, it characterises a condition independent of our merits. The Latin base of the word adolescent means “growing, maturing”; teenagers are adolescents. Adolescents, therefore, are not of equal rank but have equal rights with adults. In adult society, not everyone can be an engineer or a doctor, but engineers and doctors are expected to respect other people’s rights; for example, to speak politely to someone who is less well-off or less educated than they are. The distinction between equality of status and equality of rights applies in cases where, as in the teacher-student relationship, a higher “status” is accompanied by greater responsibility. Instances from the papers published in this issue include a doctor’s responsibility toward a patient, a parent’s toward

a child, a teacher's towards the pupils, and the responsibility of a person with greater social power (such as the head of a public works program) toward those with less power (such as a public works employee). There are relationships, however, in which we are equally responsible for one another, when the two individuals or groups are not only equal in rights but also equal in status (for example, in the relationship between a Roma citizen and a non-Roma citizen, between a man and a woman).

Interpersonal interactions go awry when one group or individual imposes or forces something upon the other without taking responsibility for their own role or for the other person. The consequences of irresponsible abuse of power are decisive in many people's lives. For example, people's self-esteem is affected by the experience they have when a doctor, a teacher, or other person in a position of authority talks to them. This experience is also observable on a societal level: it matters how educated fellow citizens speak to less educated fellow citizens—or even about them. Sociolinguistics explores power relations exercised through the power of language. Using sociolinguistic methods, we can not only uncover abuses but, with a shared commitment, also change practices that are not based on respect for the autonomy of others. This is what we work for in this research group and in the editorial team of *Duj Dzséne*.

References

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