

“GOOD MORNING” IN SUIT AND TIE versus “HELLO” IN SHORTS WITH PIERCING:  
A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF FORMALITIES IN HUNGARIAN

Rapid change is the staple of the twenty-first century. During the past decade, the countries separated by the Iron Curtain from Western Europe became members of a reconfigured global economy. From behind their closed societies with insular walls a new scenario emerged: in East Central Europe and the former Soviet Union, local economies and the global market embraced each other as well as the local languages had a gradual, but significant encounter with a rapidly spreading global English. As Krouglov (1996: 89) noted, “rarely has the present-day sociolinguist had the opportunity to observe such a linguistic upheaval as that which is now occurring in Eastern Europe.”

Over the past decade, Hungary’s state controlled economy has transformed into a market economy. Budapest itself has become a fast-developing urban center, where changes in the socio-cultural, political and economic spheres are evident. One of the concomitant of this change is that new private companies and firms arose serving their new clientele (cf. Kornai 1996). The traditional mode of collective consumption was gradually exchanged with the emerging consumerism. How do people talk in this new era of consumerism?

In my present paper, I attempt to look at discourse used in Budapest public settings, more particularly how service providers and customers interact with each other in terms of using formality versus informality. The present paper is a preliminary qualitative analysis of 20 interviews with clients and service providers, based on data that comes from a 12-month dissertation fieldwork research, conducted in two travel agencies in Budapest in 2003-2004.

As reflected in their pseudonyms, Transitional Travel comes from the time of the transition of the regime in Hungary. Brand New Travel, on the other hand, is a quite young, western-style company. Since these workplaces differ in their appearance and conduct, with the first connected to more traditional structure as opposed to the second newer, more westernized style, my original hypothesis was that I would find more formal forms between service providers and clients at the older “Transitional Travel” and more informal tokens at the newer “Brand New Travel.” Thus, one of my social variables company profile (i.e. Transitional vs Brand New) would bear special consideration. Based on the interviews, however, it seems that two other social variables (age and speakers’ appearance) have a more important role than expected earlier.

For example, almost all of my service provider interviewees at the “Brand New Travel” explained their choice of in/formal forms depended on the customers’ way of dressing and appearance (e.g. suit and tie, beard, shorts, piercing, sandals, etc.) This supports the view that in/formality lacks well-defined and generally accepted rules and in addition to the larger categories of widely used social variables (e.g. age, gender, etc.), other factors such as haircut or body piercing may also influence people’s choice of in/formal language (cf. Paulston, 1984).

#### References

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