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Language Variation and Identity among Transcarpathian Hungarian Refugees in Hungary

István Cserniczkó^{1,2*} , Anikó Beregszászi² 

¹ Department of Applied Linguistics, University of Pannonia, 8200 Veszprém, Hungary

² Department of Philology, Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education, 90202 Berehove, Ukraine

ABSTRACT

This study examines how Transcarpathian Hungarian refugees who relocated to Hungary after 24 February 2022 negotiate language variation, identity, and integration in a same-language migration context. Employing a mixed-methods design, an online questionnaire (n = 120) assessed perceptions of dialectal difference, use of Slavic borrowings, comprehension breakdowns, and experiences of evaluative comments; semi-structured follow-up interviews (n = 18) provided in-depth qualitative insights into everyday adaptation and identity work. Quantitative results indicate that the vast majority (90.8%) detected differences between the variant they brought from Transcarpathia and varieties encountered in Hungary; 57% reported instances where their lexical choices were not understood by Hungarian interlocutors, and 40% recalled direct evaluative or stigmatising remarks. Interview narratives clarify these patterns: a shared language eased immediate practical integration, yet heightened metalinguistic salience led many speakers to actively self-monitor, suppress dialectal markers and Slavic loanwords in public contexts, and seek to acquire competence in formal administrative registers. Applying Yeung and Flubacher's framework, the study shows that categorisation, selection, and activation processes operate even within same-language migration, converting subtle intralinguistic features into markers of inclusion/exclusion. The findings underscore that integration policy should extend beyond basic language provision to include orientation to regional registers,

*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

István Cserniczkó, Department of Applied Linguistics, University of Pannonia, 8200 Veszprém, Hungary; Department of Philology, Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education, 90202 Berehove, Ukraine; Email: cserniczko.istvan@kmf.org.ua

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administrative terminology, and sociolinguistic norms, while designing interventions that reduce intralinguistic stigma and support maintenance of migrants' dialectal identities.

Keywords: Transcarpathian Hungarian; Dialectal Variation; Language Identity; Linguistic Adaptation; Intralinguistic Stigma; Language Ideology; Same-language Migration

1. Introduction

Recent publications have examined the linguistic processes taking place among Ukrainian refugees who relocated abroad due to the war. Researchers have identified several linguistic challenges faced by refugees in foreign-language environments, including obstacles stemming from the lack of proficiency in the host country's language, the shift from Russian to Ukrainian, the conscious distancing from Russian—perceived as the language of the aggressor—and the incorporation of the Ukrainian language into personal and collective identity^[1–3]. Our research, however, focuses on the linguistic adaptation of a particular group of Ukrainian refugees in a unique situation. Specifically, we examined members of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine who relocated to Hungary following the outbreak of the full-scale war. Our findings indicate that language adaptation—and the reconfiguration of identity constructions closely tied to language—play a crucial role in the integration process, even when the refugees' mother tongue is the same as that of the host country.

Since 2014, an armed conflict has been unfolding in Ukraine, which escalated into a full-scale war on 24 February 2022. One major consequence of this breach of international law is that millions of Ukrainian citizens have decided to leave the country. Driven by the dangers of active combat, the stress of frequent and loud air-raid sirens, the mobilisation of men aged 18–60, and a sharp economic downturn, the number of internally and internationally displaced persons—including among Ukraine's national minorities, notably the Hungarian community—rose significantly^[4].

Prior to the escalation of hostilities, according to the 2001 national census, Ukraine was home to 156,566 individuals of Hungarian ethnicity, while 161,618 persons identified Hungarian as their mother tongue. Strikingly, 96.8% of Hungarians in Ukraine and 98.2% of native Hungarian speakers were concentrated in a single region: Transcarpathia. There, ethnic Hungarians constituted the second-largest community,

numbering 151,516 (12.1%) after Ukrainians (80.5%), while the proportion of mother-tongue Hungarian speakers was 12.7% (158,729 individuals) in 2001^[5].

The demographic profile of Transcarpathian Hungarians may have shifted substantially since 2001—especially following the 2014 escalation—due to the repeated emigration of thousands of Hungarian-minority youths, predominantly to Hungary. The onset of the full-scale war has prompted yet another wave of displacement within this community, located in western Ukraine^[4].

Thousands of Transcarpathian Hungarians arriving in Hungary from February 2022 onwards not only left their homeland, but also faced the challenge of integrating into a new social, political, economic, cultural, and linguistic environment that differs in multiple respects from their familiar milieu. On the one hand, in Hungary, these migrants—unlike in Ukraine—do not face situations that obligate them to use a second language. In their native Transcarpathian territory, Ukrainian social norms and official language policies often require or recommend the use of *Ukrainian* in many public and institutional contexts^[5,6]. As noted by Simonyi and Pisano^[7], a typical Transcarpathian Hungarian who grew up in a Hungarian-majority settlement has usually attended a Hungarian-language school (and often does so for their own children), shops in Hungary, watches Hungarian television, listens to Hungarian-language radio, and spends weekends in nearby Hungarian towns for recreation, such as going to the cinema. For many such individuals, crossing the Ukraine–Hungary border is largely a routine administrative process, entailing no marked changes, since they already live in a predominantly Hungarian linguistic ecosystem.

However, our research demonstrates that the new circumstances arising from displacement represent a significant linguistic and sociocultural challenge to Transcarpathian Hungarians. This imposed monolingual environment poses additional challenges for refugees from Ukraine more broadly^[8,9]. Transcarpathian Hungarians in Hungary must also negotiate differences between the linguistic conventions

of the host community and their own language habits, shaped in their homeland^[10].

2. Integration and Adaptation

Yeung and Flubacher examine discourses of integration through the lens of language, skills, and the politics of difference^[11]. They conceptualise integration not as a unified construct but as an often contradictory, politically flexible, and contested notion—one that can serve both inclusive and exclusionary purposes. Central to their analysis is linguistic competence, which European integration policies treat as a key prerequisite for social, economic, and legal incorporation.

The article identifies three core processes:

- 1) Categorisation – Through language requirements and testing, social groups, statuses, and entitlements are constructed (e.g., citizens vs. non-citizens, “migrants” vs. “expats”), resulting in hierarchies and debates over legitimacy.
- 2) Selection – Migrants are chosen on the basis of economic utility, skills, and language proficiency, often implicitly filtered through cultural or ethnic criteria. Language courses and examinations thus become sites of “investment” in which participants’ economic potential is assessed.
- 3) Activation – In line with the neoliberal *workfare* logic, migrants are expected to take an active role in rendering themselves “marketable” (e.g., through soft skills training and linguistic self-improvement), with success or failure framed as individual responsibility.

Although Yeung and Flubacher draw their conclusions from multilingual contexts, it will become evident that their insights are directly relevant to several aspects of the empirical findings presented in the following study^[11].

3. Hungarian as a Pluricentric Language

In contemporary linguistics, a pluricentric language is defined as one whose codified varieties function au-

tonomously across more than one sovereign state^[12,13]. Exemplars of this phenomenon include English, German, Spanish, and Portuguese. Hungarian likewise meets the criteria: it serves as the autochthonous language of sizeable communities (i.e., not diasporic immigrants) in at least seven countries besides Hungary—most notably Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, and Ukraine, as well as Austria, Croatia, and Slovenia.

Within these host countries, the codified standard Hungarian (i.e., “literary Hungarian”) is actively employed in a range of public spheres: Hungarian-language theatres regularly stage performances; newspapers and magazines are widely published; television and radio broadcast extensively in Hungarian; news portals operate online in Hungarian; and educational institutions offering instruction in Hungarian range from kindergarten to university level. These sustained linguistic infrastructures underscore Hungarian’s affiliation with the category of pluricentric languages. Lanstyák^[14] was among the first to theorize this status, and his insights have been reinforced by subsequent scholars^[15,16].

Despite a substantial accumulation of scholarly literature documenting the development and linguistic features of Hungarian variants spoken outside Hungary^[5,6,16–19], there remains a pronounced gap in research on the integration experiences of refugees from minority Hungarian communities arriving in Hungary. Few empirical studies have explored whether, upon migration, these individuals perceive differences between the Hungarian “brought from home” and the local Hungarian norms, or whether they adapt to host-country language features^[10,20–22].

Drawing upon an empirical dataset gathered from Transcarpathian Hungarians who relocated to Hungary after 24 February 2022, this study aims to:

- 1) examine their perceptions of the linguistic practices encountered in the Hungarian host community — in terms of phonology, lexis, syntax, and pragmatic usage;
- 2) identify salient differences and similarities they detect between their home-region Hungarian and the variant(s) prevalent in Hungary;
- 3) explore how these linguistic perceptions influence refugees’ language behaviour, including code-switching tendencies, accommodation strategies, and linguistic attitudes.

4. Materials and Methods

Between April and May 2022, an online questionnaire was distributed by e-mail to approximately 600 Transcarpathian Hungarians who had relocated to Hungary following the outbreak of large-scale hostilities. Recruitment relied primarily on institutional contacts at Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College and on snowballing through relatives, friends, and acquaintances. In total, 120 completed questionnaires were returned (63 men, 57 women), yielding an observed response rate of approximately 20%. Although the sampling method was non probabilistic and thus does not yield a statistically representative cross section of either the Transcarpathian Hungarian population or all those who relocated to Hungary, the responses nevertheless offer insights into the linguistic norms, attitudes, and perceptions of this specific contingent of recent migrants^[23]. Given the recruitment method, the sample is best characterised as a convenience (non-probability) sample and therefore not statistically representative of all Transcarpathian Hungarians who relocated to Hungary; results should be interpreted with this limitation in mind.

The questionnaire collected sociodemographic background, migration and accommodation data, self-reported use of Slavic borrowings, perceived differences between

Transcarpathian and Hungarian varieties, and experiences of (mis)comprehension and evaluative comments. Quantitative data were entered and analysed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics (counts, percentages) are reported for key items; χ^2 tests were used to examine associations between categorical variables. Where χ^2 tests were reported, exact p -values and degrees of freedom are provided (e.g., $\chi^2(1) = 2.21, p = 0.137$).

From July 2022, semi-structured interviews ($n = 18$; 10 women, 8 men) were conducted via Zoom with a subset of questionnaire respondents to explore integration trajectories, language use in different domains, and identity work. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and subjected to multi-stage thematic analysis following established procedures. The questionnaire data were entered and analysed using SPSS. The ATLAS.ti program was used to analyze the interviews.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the authors' institutional research ethics committee. Informed consent was secured from all participants; data were anonymised prior to analysis and are available on reasonable request (see Data Availability Statement).

Figure 1 maps the places of origin of respondents across nearly the entire territory of ethnic Hungarian settlement in Transcarpathia, demonstrating the geographic diversity of the participant pool (see also **Figure 2**).

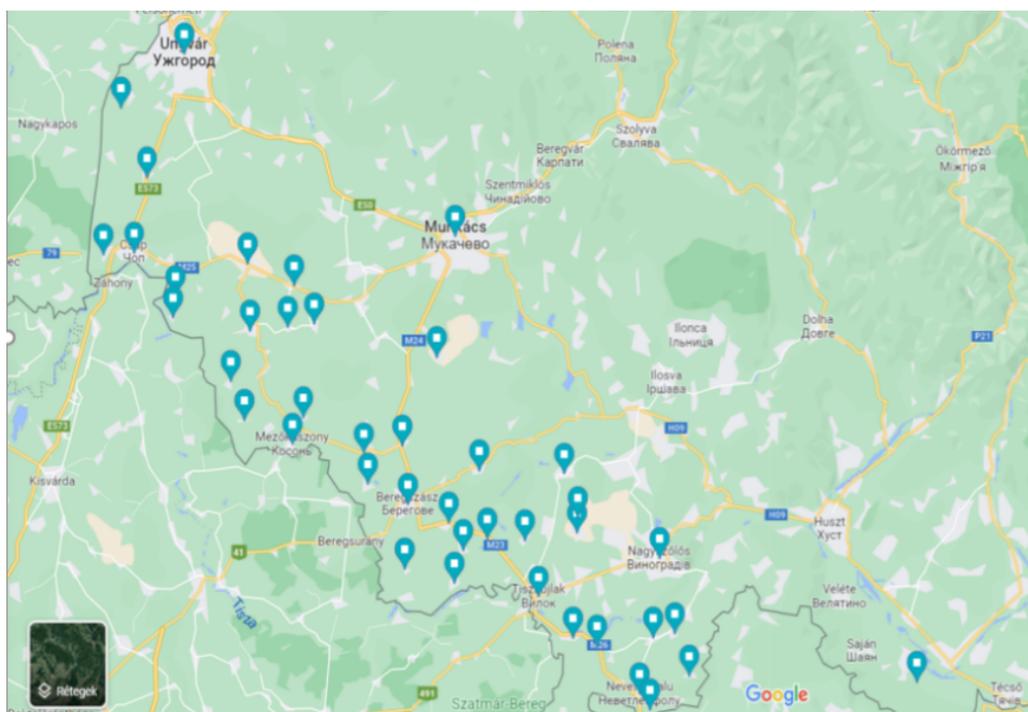


Figure 1. Respondents' places of residence in Ukraine (Transcarpathia)^[10]. 1 cm = 10 km

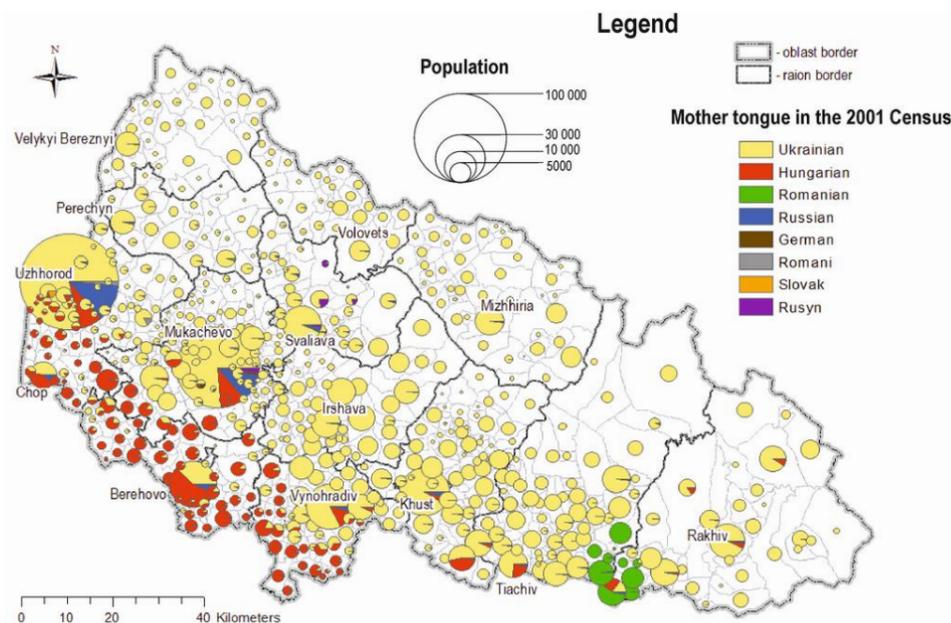


Figure 2. Composition of the population in Transcarpathia according to the mother tongue – based on the data of the 2001 census [5].

Informants resettled in various regions across Hungary. The majority resided with relatives, friends, or acquaintances, while a substantial number benefited from support provided by governmental and non-governmental

organisations in Hungary. A smaller subset independently rented or purchased apartments or houses. Figure 3 illustrates the locations of informants within Hungary during the study period.

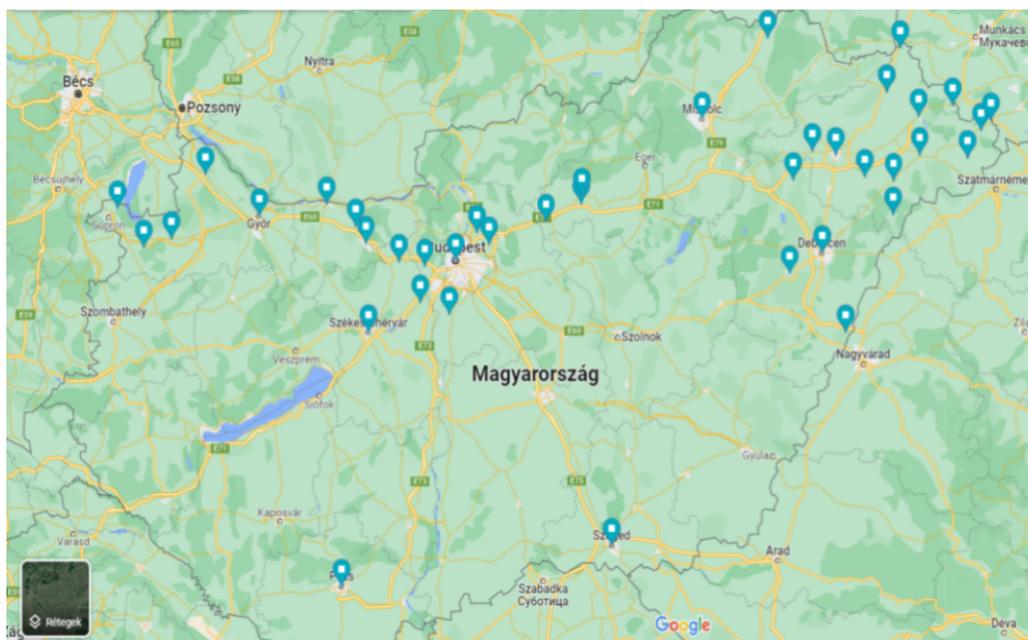


Figure 3. Informants' Accommodation in Hungary [10]. 1 cm = 50 km

From July 2022 onwards, we conducted online interviews via Zoom with 18 individuals (10 women and 8 men) who had previously completed the online questionnaire. These interviews explored the participants' process

of integration into Hungarian society, their short-term and long-term plans, and their perceptions of their current circumstances. Semi-structured qualitative interviews, despite the smaller sample size, help alleviate this limitation by pro-

viding rich, in-depth insights into individual experiences, thereby strengthening the validity of qualitative statements. The interview data were transcribed verbatim and subjected to a multi-stage thematic analysis^[24].

5. Results of the Study

5.1. Initial Experiences: A Shared Language Facilitates Integration

The full-scale invasion took Ukraine’s civilian population by surprise, including ethnic Hungarians living in Transcarpathia. Most of them set off within the first few

days of the war, driven by the uncertainty of the situation. Since Transcarpathia shares a direct border with Hungary, it was a rational choice for many to seek refuge in a neighboring country whose language and culture they were already familiar with.

In the first days, this linguistic and cultural familiarity greatly eased the refugees’ situation. In contrast to other refugees, they could immediately rely on a shared language, which facilitated their early interactions. All respondents to the questionnaire indicated that their integration went smoothly. Although they missed their homes, they did not feel out of place in Hungary. The same sentiment was echoed in the interviews as well (**Excerpt 1**).

Excerpt 1 (in Hungarian):	Excerpt 1 (English Translation; the Excerpts Were Translated into English by the Authors):
<p>KUTATÓ: Könnyen ment a beilleszkedés? ADATKÖZLŐ: Nem a saját ágyunkban aludtunk ugyan, de azért mégiscsak otthon voltunk. (...) Láttuk viszont azt, hogy milyen nehéz azoknak, akik nem beszélnek magyarul. A sok ukrán meg orosz anyanyelvű még a feliratokat sem tudta elolvasni. Sokan a menekülteknek kiosztott angol nyelvű tájékoztatókat sem értették. (...) Mikor láttuk, mennyire nehéz nekik, összeszedtük magunkat, és mentünk segíteni. A nagyobbik fiam kiment a határra, és ott tolmácsolt a magyar határőrök és az ukrán menekültek között. A kisebbik az iskolában vigasztalta a tornaterembe besúfolt ukrán gyerekeket, hívta őket játszani meg focizni. A feleségem orvosnő, ő egy mentőautó csapatához szerződött, és az elsősegélyre vagy orvosi ellátásra szoruló ukránokat látta el. Minden este elmesélte, mennyire meglepődtek és milyen hálásak voltak szegény menekültek, amikor a saját nyelvüket hallották, a saját nyelvükön mondhatták el, mi a bajuk, mi fáj. Ilyenkor azt éreztem, milyen szerencsések vagyunk, hogy mi mégiscsak egy olyan országba jöhettünk, ahol minden szót értek, ahol mindenki ugyanazt a nyelvet beszéli, amit én: a magyart. Hálát adtam Istennek, hogy magyar vagyok és hogy van olyan ország, hogy Magyarország, ami befogadott bennünket.</p>	<p>RESEARCHER: Was it easy to adapt? INFORMANT: We didn’t sleep in our own beds, of course, but we still felt at home. (...) What we did notice, though, was how difficult it was for those who didn’t speak Hungarian. Many Ukrainian and Russian speakers couldn’t even read the signs. Some didn’t understand the English-language information leaflets handed out to refugees. (...) Seeing how hard it was for them, we pulled ourselves together and went to help. My older son went to the border to interpret between the Hungarian border guards and the Ukrainian refugees. My younger one comforted the Ukrainian children crowded into the school gym and invited them to play football. My wife is a doctor—she joined an ambulance team and provided medical assistance and first aid to Ukrainians in need. Every evening she told us how surprised and grateful the refugees were when they heard their own language and were able to explain what was wrong in their mother tongue. At times like that, I felt how lucky we were to have ended up in a country where I could understand every word, where everyone spoke the same language as I do—Hungarian. I thanked God that I am Hungarian, and that there is such a place as Hungary, a country that welcomed us.</p>

All of this highlights that the ability to communicate immediately in a shared language significantly reduces initial stress levels among refugees and facilitates essential day-to-day interactions. The absence of language barriers accelerates the establishment of early social connections and access to basic services. The advantages of a common language become particularly evident when compared to the situation of those who, in addition to the trauma of displacement, also face the challenges of navigating an entirely unfamiliar language.

5.2. Attitudes towards Transcarpathian Hungarian Dialects

Perceptual dialectology investigates how lay language users (non-linguists) perceive and evaluate regional language

varieties^[25]. In 1996, a large-scale survey involving 846 respondents from Hungary and adjacent nations asked where “Hungarian is spoken most beautifully.” In that sample, 31 % attributed the most beautiful Hungarian to speakers in Romania, among whom 144 were Transcarpathian Hungarians. Just 5 % of these minority speakers agreed that Romanian Hungarian was the most beautiful, while 56 % favoured the Transcarpathian variant as the most elegant. Evidence from earlier research indicates that Transcarpathian informants generally hold both standard Hungarian and their own regional dialect in high regard^[6]. Compared to other autochthonous Hungarian communities outside Hungary, Transcarpathian Hungarians demonstrate particularly positive attitudes towards their local dialects^[26]. Though such evaluations remain inherently subjective and not strictly scientific,

attitudes toward dialects often implicitly convey judgements about the associated speech community.

In our 2022 online survey, we asked informants to compare the beauty of Hungarian as spoken in Transcarpathia with that spoken in Hungary. Approximately half of respondents (44.2%) unequivocally considered their home-region variety—the Transcarpathian dialect—to be the most beautiful. Thirty-three participants (27.5%) reported no perceived

aesthetic difference between Hungarian variants in Hungary and Transcarpathia, while 28 individuals (23.3%) preferred the Hungarian spoken in their kin-state over their own home variant (**Figure 4**). Thus, in contrast to Ukrainian perceptions of Ukrainian dialects in Transcarpathia as among the least prestigious^[27], Transcarpathian Hungarians express a distinctly positive evaluative stance towards their regional Hungarian dialects.

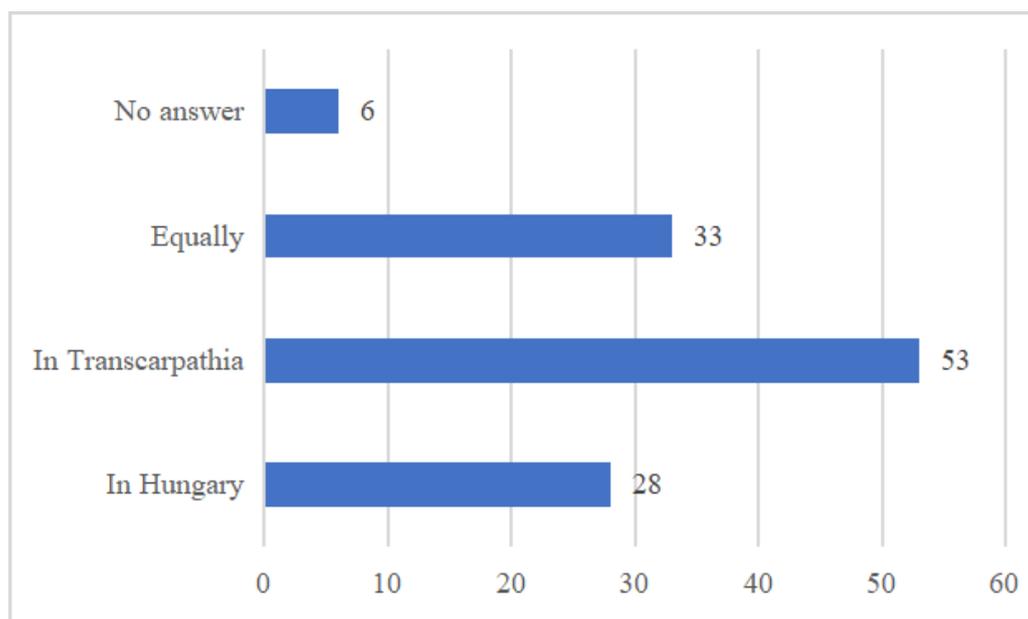


Figure 4. Responses of Transcarpathian Hungarians who fled to Hungary after 24 February 2022 to the question “Where is Hungarian spoken most beautifully?” (n = 120).

During the interviews, we also returned to the question of where Hungarian is spoken most beautifully. The majority of respondents expressed the view that genuinely beautiful

Hungarian is not spoken in Hungary proper, but in the peripheral regions of the Hungarian speech area—specifically, Transcarpathia (**Excerpt 2**).

Excerpt 2 (in Hungarian):

KUTATÓ: És miért gondolod úgy, hogy Kárpátalján szebben beszélnek magyarul?
 ADATKÖZLŐ: Mert például mi is használunk olyan szavakat a magyar beszédünkben, mint mondjuk *bulocska*, *dovidka* meg *pászpport*, de ezek annyi angol meg amerikai szót használnak, hogy nem mindig értem, mit akarnak. Amikor beálltam dolgozni, az első héten csak néztem, mi lehet az a *dress code* meg *teambuilding*. Ezek azt hiszik, attól okosabbak vagy műveltebbek, ha ilyen szavakat használnak. Mi otthon igyekszünk tisztán magyarul beszélni. De itt nem, erre nem figyelnek oda.

Excerpt 2 (English Translation):

RESEARCHER: And why do you believe that Hungarian is spoken more beautifully in Transcarpathia?
 INFORMANT: Because, for example, we also use certain words in our Hungarian, such as *bulochka*, *dovidka*, and *pasport* [these being Slavic borrowings corresponding to the standard Hungarian forms *zsemle*, *igazolás*, *személyi igazolvány* (“bun”, “certificate”, “passport”)]. But people in Hungary proper use so many English and American loanwords that I do not always understand what they want to say. When I started working, during my first week I was simply looking up what “*dress code*” or “*teambuilding*” means. They think that they’ll sound smarter or more educated if they use such terms. At home, we make an effort to speak pure Hungarian—but here, no, they pay no attention to that.

This finding points to a strong underlying language ideology among Hungarians in Transcarpathia, whereby their dialect is perceived not merely as a regional variety but as a

symbol of linguistic authenticity and resistance to external linguistic pressures. This gives rise to a fascinating paradox: a minority dialect, often regarded by outsiders as peripheral

or non-standard, is elevated by its speakers as a “purer” or more “original” form of the language. Such an ideological stance plays a crucial role in identity construction, enabling individuals who have migrated to maintain a sense of linguistic pride and distinctiveness, even when confronted with the dominant variety of the host country. The prestige of the mother tongue brought from home was undoubtedly reinforced by the fact that many were able to offer support during the most difficult early days precisely by using their knowledge of Hungarian to assist those who did not speak the language.

5.3. Differences between Hungarian in Hungary and Hungarian in Transcarpathia

Previous investigations asked informants whether they perceived a difference between Hungarian spoken in Hungary and that spoken in Transcarpathia. Among 144 Transcarpathian Hungarians surveyed in 1996, approximately

two-thirds (ca. 67%) affirmed that the variety used in Hungary was not entirely the same as their Transcarpathian Hungarian; furthermore, 36% of respondents reported occasions when they did not fully understand Hungarian speakers from Hungary, or vice versa^[28].

Within our own sample of Transcarpathian Hungarians who relocated to Hungary after 24 February 2022, only 11 respondents (9.2%) maintained that there was no difference between the Hungarian variants, whereas the overwhelming majority—109 individuals (90.8%)—identified differences between the Hungarian they brought from their home region and the variant in use in Hungary.

During qualitative interviews, several participants provided concrete linguistic examples. For instance, **Excerpt 3** references a characteristic dialectal feature: the use of *kell lesz* (a Transcarpathian future-tense form of *kell*) instead of the standard Hungarian *kelleni fog* for expressing necessity. This feature has been observed and analysed in the sociolinguistic literature on Transcarpathian dialects^[29].

Excerpt 3 (in Hungarian):	Excerpt 3 (English Translation):
<p>KUTATÓ: Meg tudod állapítani, ha beszélsz valakivel, hogy ő magyarországi vagy kárpátaljai?</p> <p>ADATKÖZLŐ: Persze, szinte biztos, hogy megismerem, ha kárpátaljaival találkozik. Hallom a beszédén. (...) Talán a szóhasználat, az a legjobban mutatja, hogy ki jött onnan, ahonnan én.</p> <p>KUTATÓ: És milyen szavak alapján ismered meg őket?</p> <p>ADATKÖZLŐ: Hát, ha valaki azt mondja, “<i>Kellesz nekem egy új cipő</i>”, arról már tudom, hogy nem magyarországi. Azok azt mondják, hogy “<i>Kelleni fog nekem egy új cipő</i>”. Szóval így, ilyenek.</p>	<p>RESEARCHER: Can you determine, when talking with someone, whether they are from Hungary or from Transcarpathia?</p> <p>INFORMANT: Certainly. I am almost certain I would recognise if someone is a Transcarpathian speaker—I hear it in their speech. (...) Perhaps certain lexical choices—those seem most indicative of regional origin.</p> <p>RESEARCHER: Which particular words tend to mark them out?</p> <p>INFORMANT: For instance, if someone says <i>Kell lesz nekem egy új cipő</i> [“I will need a new pair of shoes”, using the dialectal form <i>kell lesz</i>], I immediately know they are not from Hungary. In Hungary, people say: <i>Kelleni fog nekem egy új cipő</i> [“I will need a new pair of shoes”, with the standard future-tense form <i>kelleni fog</i>]. These little things make a difference.</p>

A different informant observed a notable shift in pronominal address: residents of Hungary proper tend to use the informal second-person singular (*te*, *tegezés*) significantly more often, while speakers from Transcarpathia typically default to the formal plural forms (*ön*, *magázás*) in interactions with strangers (**Excerpt 4**). Interestingly, a similar pattern is documented among Hungarian minority communities in Romania (e.g., Transylvania): there, too, *tegezés* is rare in public contexts, and mutual V–T configurations (where the minority speaker uses *te* and the interlocutor *ön*) are not uncommon—mirroring the contrast between mainstream usage in Hungary and norms observed among diaspora groups in Eastern Europe^[30].

In mainstream practice—especially in Hungary proper—

address forms in Hungarian typically involve the informal *te* with peers and younger interlocutors, while strangers and elders are addressed using the formal *ön* or *maga* (a system of address based on *tegezés* vs. *magázás*, or T–V distinction). The respondent’s comments suggest a divergence from this norm: in the Hungarian mainstream, even stranger encounters may retain the formal *ön*, whereas in the transborder or urban setting described, *te* has become conventional—even when age or familiarity would normally require *ön*.

This reflects broader regional sociolinguistic variation: speakers from Transcarpathia tend to favour formal address (i.e., V-forms) in interactions, particularly with strangers or elders. Informants note this use as a habitual marker of regional origin. In contrast, interlocutors from Hungary

employed informal T-form address in similar situations—a feature that may be particularly salient at first encounters and

is often interpreted as overly casual or “rude” by speakers from more conservative dialect backgrounds.

Excerpt 4 (in Hungarian):	Excerpt 4 (English Translation):
<p>KUTATÓ: Meg tudod állapítani, ha beszélsz valakivel, hogy ő magyarországi vagy kárpátaljai? ADATKÖZLŐ: Nem mindig, de azért elég sokszor. (...) Ezek itt mindenkit tegeznek. Bemegeyek egy boltba, és máris letegeznek. Akkor is, ha sose láttak előtte, és nem ismernek. Még akkor is, ha fiatalabb nálam, akkor is letegez. Én meg nem ezt szoktam meg otthon. Én akkor is magázódom valakivel, akit nem ismerek, ha az fiatalabb tőlem.</p>	<p>RESEARCHER: Can you determine, when talking with someone, whether they are from Hungary or from Transcarpathia? INFORMANT: Not always, but quite often. (...) Here, everyone uses <i>te</i> [“you”-informal] even in initial interactions. When I walk into a shop, they immediately address me with <i>te</i>, even if they’ve never met me before. Even a younger person will use the informal form. That’s not how it is back home—I always address strangers formally as <i>ön</i> [“you”-formal], even if they’re younger than me.</p>

The dramatic increase in the perception of linguistic differences (from 67% in 1996 to 90.8% in 2022) is likely not solely a reflection of accelerated linguistic divergence, but rather a direct consequence of migration and the forced immersion into the linguistic environment of the host country. When individuals are removed from their familiar linguistic ecosystem and are compelled to actively navigate a new one, even subtle linguistic variations become more salient and consciously perceived. This involuntary confrontation with the “standard” or “mainstream” variety sharpens their metalinguistic awareness, heightening sensitivity to features that may have gone largely unnoticed in their home context. Such a shift has profound implications for understanding sociolinguistic adaptation in refugee or migrant contexts: migration functions as a powerful catalyst for linguistic self-reflection and for the re-evaluation of one’s own speech patterns in relation to a new linguistic norm.

5.4. Communicative Breakdowns and Stigmatisation

Linguistic differences can, in certain circumstances, lead to misunderstandings or failures of comprehension. Consequently, we asked informants whether, during their stay in Hungary, they had encountered situations in which they did not understand a Hungarian word or expression. Thirty-nine respondents (32%) answered affirmatively, fifty-two (43%) reported no such experiences, and twenty-nine (24%) skipped the question. Of those who reported comprehension difficulties, eighteen provided specific examples.

A markedly larger group indicated that the words or expressions they used were not understood by Hungarian interlocutors. Among the online questionnaire respondents, sixty-eight individuals (57%) reported such incidents, with

forty-six offering concrete examples. In contrast, fifty-two informants (43%) stated they had not experienced being misunderstood in Hungary.

In certain contexts, regional linguistic features may become stigmatised. As Eckert notes, linguistic cues indexing regional identity can be reinterpreted within the in-group as stereotypical markers or even derogatory labels^[31]. To explore this, we further asked: “Have friends or strangers ever commented on your linguistic practice?” Sixty-one respondents (50.8%) stated that no comments had been made, eleven (9.2%) could not recall any, while forty-eight (40%) confirmed that they had received evaluations of their Hungarian variant. The majority of this latter group also furnished illustrative remarks.

When recounting these experiences, five informants reported positive feedback, twelve described neutral remarks, and twenty-seven recalled specifically negative or stigmatising comments upon arrival in Hungary. One respondent recalled that the use of their dialect prompted an interlocutor to exclaim, “*Paraszt!*” (“Peasant”). Many recounted statements such as, “*That word doesn’t exist!*”—reactions triggered not only by Slavic loanwords like *buločka* (“bun” instead of standard *zsemle*), but also by dialectal forms such as *otthol, jössztek* or *kell lesz* (instead of the Hungarian standard *otthon, jöttök, kelleni fog*). While Transcarpathian speakers typically did not take these remarks to heart, many interviews included comments like: “Considering you’re from Transcarpathia, you speak Hungarian quite well”, “It’s obvious you weren’t born in Hungary”, or “You speak Hungarian with an accent”.

One informant shared that after multiple colleagues pointed out his different speech patterns, he began consciously avoiding linguistic elements that might elicit negative feedback in the new environment (**Excerpt 5**).

Excerpt 5 (in Hungarian):

KUTATÓ: Tehát észrevették a beszéded alapján, hogy nem vagy magyarországi?

ADATKÖZLŐ: Igen. De most már odafigyelek arra, hogy beszélek. És ha nem akarom, akkor nem veszik észre. (...)

KUTATÓ: És miért? Miért igyekszel?

ADATKÖZLŐ: Nem tudom, Kicsit olyan, mint amikor bújócskázol. Próbálsz elrejtőzni. Vagy beolvadni. Nem akarsz másnak látszani, mint a többiek. (...) Mert ez olyan általános emberi tulajdonság, hogy ha valami másságot fedeznek fel, akkor azt kivetik maguk közül. Hát szerintem ez van. Én meg most jöttem ide, pár hónapja, új vagyok a faluban is, a munkahelyemen is, és próbálok beolvadni. És ebbe beletartozik az is, hogy úgy beszélek, mint ők.

KUTATÓ: És mit, milyen szavak vagy minek a használatát próbálok elkerülni?

ADATKÖZLŐ: Főleg az olyan tájnyelvi szavakat, mint mondjuk a *murok*, a *tengeri*, az *ablaktőc* ilyenek. Ezeket kinevetik, és akkor az nekem olyan, mintha rajtam röhögének, vagy mintha kizárnának maguk közül, mint aki nem is magyar. Ezért inkább odafigyelek, és azt mondom, hogy *sárgarépa*, *kukorica* meg *ablakpárkány*, és akkor talán észre se veszik, hogy nem vagyok idevalósi.

Excerpt 5 (English Translation):

RESEARCHER: So, did people notice from your speech that you weren't from Hungary?

INFORMANT: Yes. But now I pay attention to how I speak—and if I choose not to, they don't notice anymore. (...)

RESEARCHER: Why? Why do you make this effort?

INFORMANT: I don't know. It's a bit like playing hide-and-seek. You try to hide or fit in. You do not want to appear different from the others. (...) Because it's a basic human trait: when someone detects something different, they reject it. I think that's how it is. I only arrived here a few months ago—I am new in the village, at work, and I'm trying to integrate. And that includes speaking like they do.

RESEARCHER: Which words or forms do you try to avoid?

INFORMANT: Mainly dialectal words like *murok*, *tengeri*, *ablaktőc* (dialect variants of Standard Hungarian *sárgarépa* 'carrot', *kukorica* 'corn', *ablakpárkány* 'windowsill') and similar terms. They laugh about them, and then it feels like they are mocking me or rejecting me as not truly Hungarian. So I'm careful and say *sárgarépa*, *kukorica*, *ablakpárkány* instead—and maybe then they won't notice I'm not local.

This strategy is widely documented among bilingual speech communities. In her landmark monograph, Gal shows that members of the Hungarian minority in Austria often avoided using the locally stigmatised dialect when communicating with interlocutors outside their community—instead they deliberately switched to Standard Hungarian to facilitate mutual understanding and to avoid negative perception^[32].

The experiences of stigmatization show that linguistic differences are not only a communication barrier, but are deeply intertwined with social acceptance and identity. The comments received (“Peasant!”, “He speaks Hungarian with an accent”) reveal that the Transcarpathian dialect carries a hidden stigma in the monolingual Hungarian context, despite its overt prestige among its speakers. This forces individuals to consciously suppress their native language characteristics to avoid negative social consequences. This highlights the significant psychological burden on refugees, who, in addition to navigating a new social and economic environment, must also manage their linguistic identity to avoid feelings of “otherness” or rejection. This finding has fundamental implications for understanding the non-linguistic effects of linguistic prejudice on integration.

5.5. Challenges in Employing Official Terminology and Official Register

Hungarians residing in Ukraine typically inhabit a multilingual setting and regularly deploy both their native tongue and the official state language, Ukrainian^[6]. Notably, Ukrainian is the presumptive language within public

institutions (e.g., local and state authorities) and for formal administrative acts, such as bureaucratic documentation^[5]. Indeed, the prevailing practice in the Transcarpathia region is to issue virtually all written governmental communications exclusively in Ukrainian. Consequently, insulated within such contexts, Transcarpathian Hungarians often confront a linguistically unfamiliar environment when required to navigate official proceedings or sign contracts in Hungarian upon arrival in Hungary—an adjustment which can be a source of substantial discomfort.

Compounding these challenges, official Ukrainian documents record personal names and surnames in Cyrillic script, using Ukrainian spelling, whereas the passports reflect the corresponding Latin-script transliteration of the Slavic form. This contrasts with the traditional Hungarian names that Transcarpathian Hungarians use—names which typically omit the patronymic element^[16]. Such discrepancies in naming practice contribute meaningfully to the legal and social hurdles faced during their official integration.

Some study participants articulated these difficulties in their own terms, noting that the mismatch between name spellings in Hungarian and Ukrainian official scripts resulted in confusion, hesitation, or linguistic awkwardness (see Excerpt 6).

This research finding reveals a critical yet often overlooked linguistic barrier to the successful civic and economic integration of refugees: limited knowledge of the specialized vocabulary and formal register of official and bureaucratic language within their own native tongue. Even for native

speakers, if official communication in their previous administrative context was predominantly conducted in another language (such as Ukrainian), this may result in a lack of the specific linguistic capital necessary to navigate essential life processes—such as housing, employment, or legal affairs—in the host country. The sense of shame expressed by the informant underscores the psychological impact of this func-

tional linguistic gap, which can be particularly frustrating for individuals who otherwise perceive themselves as fluent in the language. This has significant implications for refugee integration policies and support services, highlighting the need for targeted language assistance that includes formal and legal registers, rather than focusing solely on general language proficiency.

Excerpt 6 (in Hungarian):

ADATKÖZLŐ: Otthon állami cégnél dolgoztam, és minden hivatalos iratot ukránul kaptunk és írtunk. Sok szerződés meg mindenféle okmány volt a kezemben, de ezek mind ukrán nyelven voltak. Ha elmentem egy hivatalba, és kellett írni egy kérvényt, azt is ukránul adtam be. Ameddig nem jöttünk át Magyarországra, eszembe se jutott, hogy magyarul vajon ki tudok-e tölteni egy adatlapot. Szégyeltem magam, de kiderült, hogy nem. Vagy közelebb áll az igazsághoz, ha azt mondom: ki tudom, de nehezen. Nehezebben, mint ukránul.

KUTATÓ: Ezt hogy érti? El tudná mondani, mi történt pontosan?

ADATKÖZLŐ: Kinéztük a házat, amit ki akartunk bérelni. Bementünk a tulajdonossal és a férjemmel együtt egy ügyvédhez, aki élénk tette a bérleti szerződést. Azzal kezdődött, hogy ki kellett tölteni a személyes adataimat. Na, kiderült, hogy ilyet se nagyon csináltam még magyarul. Milyen nevet írjak be? Ahogy az útlevelemben vagyok, *Szabov Jelizaveta Ivanivna* [a nevet megváltoztattuk — a kutató], vagy azt, hogy magyarul van a nevem? Mert magyarul én bizony *Szabó Erzsébet* vagyok. Vagy azt írjam be, hogy *Sabov Yelizaveta*, amit az ukrán útlevelembe írtak? Ha magyarul írom, akkor hozzá kell-e tenni a nevemhez az apai nevemet? Mert ukránul, az ukrán személyi igazolványomban én *Сабов Єлизавета Іванівна* vagyok. És csak eztán jött a neheze! Elolvastuk a férjemmel a szerződést, de a felét se értettük. Én azt a szót, hogy *kaució* meg *kötbér*, életemben nem hallottam, nem értettem, mit jelent az, hogy illetékmentes, pedig magyar az anyanyelvem.

Excerpt 6 (English Translation):

INFORMANT: Back home, I worked at a state-owned company and all official documents we issued and received were in Ukrainian. I handled many contracts and legal forms—but all of them were in Ukrainian. Whenever I had to go to government offices and submit an application, I did so in Ukrainian. Until our move to Hungary, I never even considered whether I could fill in a form in Hungarian. I’m ashamed to say this, but it turned out I cannot—or at least only with difficulty. It was harder than using Ukrainian.

RESEARCHER: What do you mean by that? Could you describe precisely what happened?

INFORMANT: We chose a house to rent and went with my husband to a lawyer, who placed the rental contract in front of us. It all began with completing my personal details, and it turned out that I hadn’t done this type of thing very often in Hungarian. What name should I write? As in my Ukrainian passport: *Sabov Yelyzaveta Ivanivna* [name altered]. Or the Hungarian version of my name? In Hungarian, I am “Szabó Erzsébet”. Or should I write *Sabov Yelizaveta*, as shown in the Latin-script transliteration in my Ukrainian passport? If I write in Hungarian, must I include the patronymic? In my Ukrainian passport I am listed as “Sabov Yelyzaveta Ivanivna”. Only after that did the hardest part begin! My husband and I read through the contract—you know, the *kaució* [security deposit], the *kötbér* [contractual penalty], the *illetékmentes* [exempt from transfer duty]—words I had never heard in my life, even though Hungarian is my native language.

5.6. Use of Slavic Loanwords

Previous research has repeatedly confirmed that a highly salient feature of speech among Hungarian minorities abroad is the use of lexical borrowings from majority-language communities—a pattern noticeable even to lay listeners^[6]. Drawing on this insight, we asked our respondents whether they used Ukrainian and/or Russian borrowings at home in Transcarpathia, as well as during their stay in Hungary. At home in Transcarpathia, 96 respondents (80 %) reported that they regularly use Ukrainian and/or Russian loanwords; 15 (12.5%) believed they *might* also sometimes do so; while only 8 (6.7%) stated they *never* use them. Within the Hungarian context, the number of those who *confirm* using such borrowings falls to 61 (50.8 %), whereas the proportion who may *use* them rises to 23 (19.2 %); the share of those who *categorically do not use* such elements increases to 35 (29.2 %, see **Table 1**). The chi-square result ($\chi^2 = 26.44$; $df = 2$; $p < 0.001$) confirms that the reduction in the use of Slavic borrowings in Hungary is not a random fluctuation but a systematic adaptation. In

practical terms, while 80% of respondents reported using borrowings at home, only about half did so in Hungary. This shift highlights the deliberate, strategic nature of linguistic accommodation: speakers suppress features that might index them as outsiders. The statistical significance thus substantiates the qualitative observation that lexical choices become part of identity negotiation in host contexts.

Sixty-eight respondents (56.7% of the sample) indicated that, while in Hungary, they make a deliberate effort to avoid using Slavic borrowings—that is: they *consciously refrain* from employing Ukrainian or Russian lexical items. A representative excerpt from the interviews captures this strategic adaptation: the informant explicitly differentiates between communicative contexts, avoiding Slavic-derived words when interacting with Hungarians in Hungary—especially in formal settings or with unfamiliar interlocutors—yet considers such borrowings perfectly natural and appropriate when speaking with Transcarpathian acquaintances (**Excerpt 7**).

Table 1. Number and percentage of users of Slavic borrowings in Transcarpathia and Hungary.

	At Home, in Transcarpathia		in Hungary	
	people	%	people	%
I use	96	80.0	61	50.8
I probably use	15	12.5	23	19.2
No	8	6.7	35	29.2
No answer	1	0.8	1	0.8
Total	120	100	120	100

Excerpt 7 (in Hungarian):	Excerpt 7 (English Translation):
<p>KUTATÓ: És mit szólnak a magyarországi ismerőseid, amikor ukrán vagy orosz szavakat használasz a magyar beszédedben? ADATKÖZLŐ: Azért hivatalba, idegen emberek előtt szép magyar nyelvet használok. Ismerősök előtt meg “po-zákárpátszki”. KUTATÓ: Po-zákárpátszki, vagyis úgy, ahogy otthon beszélünk? ADATKÖZLŐ: Igen, úgy. Mint otthon, Kárpátalján.</p>	<p>RESEARCHER: What do your Hungarian acquaintances say when you use Ukrainian or Russian words in your Hungarian? INFORMANT: Well, at official events or with strangers, I make sure to use standard Hungarian. But when I’m with people I know, I speak “po-zákárpátszki”. RESEARCHER: By “po-zákárpátszki”, you mean the way we speak at home? INFORMANT: Yes, exactly—as we speak at home, in Transcarpathia.</p>

The observed shift in the use of Slavic loanwords serves as an excellent example of strategic linguistic performance, wherein speakers actively engage in “audience design.” Informants consciously and selectively suppress linguistic features that might reveal their bilingual background in specific social contexts (such as official settings or interactions with strangers) in order to align with perceived norms of the host community and to avoid potential stigmatization. This highlights the dynamic and agentive nature of linguistic adaptation. The clear differentiation between public/formal and private/in-group contexts also reveals the ongoing maintenance of in-group linguistic identity, demonstrating that adaptation does not necessarily entail abandonment, but rather a sophisticated form of code-switching or register-shifting based on social calculation. This illustrates that linguistic behavior is a form of social action, deeply intertwined with

the management of identity.

5.7. Language and Identity

The close nexus between language and identity is widely acknowledged in sociolinguistic scholarship, especially within minority and diaspora communities. In the case of Transcarpathian Hungarians who resettled in Hungary after 24 February 2022, the dialect brought from home serves not only as a linguistic means of communication but also as a symbolic marker of regional belonging and nostalgic attachment to their homeland. This is vividly illustrated in **Excerpt 8**, where an informant describes how their native variety functions as both a communicative tool and a badge of origin—a form of cultural heritage they carried with them in their migration.

Excerpt 8 (in Hungarian):	Excerpt 8 (English Translation):
<p>ADATKÖZLŐ: Amikor reggel bement a rádió, hogy kitört a háború, két óra alatt összepakoltunk. (...) Nagyon sokat segítettek az itteniek. Azt hiszem, befogadtak minket. Én az iskolában, ahol tanítani kezdtem, természetesen az irodalmi nyelvet használom. A gyerekek is igyekeznek úgy beszélni, ahogy az iskolában elvárják. De amikor hazaérünk, előjönnek az otthoni szavak. Mákos haluskát eszünk, nem mákos tésztát. Murkot teszek a levesbe, nem sárgarépát. Azt mondom, hogy <i>bánka</i>, <i>tumbocska</i>... Ezek a szavak a sajátjaim, otthoniak számomra. Mivel messze, nagyon messze vagyunk Kárpátaljától, ezekkel a szavakkal, az otthoni nyelvvél éljük meg a honvágyunkat. Meg hát amíg használjuk ezeket a szavakat, addig még kárpátaljai magyarok vagyunk. Különlegesen. Nem csak egyszerű magyarok, mint itt mindenki körülöttünk. A magyar nyelv összeköt minden magyart a világban. De mit tudunk úgy is beszélni magyarul, hogy megőrizzük a gyökereinket. A nyelvhasználatunkkal mi ki tudjuk fejezni azt, hogy mi Kárpátaljáról jöttünk, és kicsit oda is tartozunk.</p>	<p>INFORMANT: When war was declared on the radio in the morning, within two hours we had packed. (...) The locals helped us immensely—it felt like we belonged here. At school, where I started teaching, I naturally use Literary Hungarian, and so do the children—as required in school. But once we return home, our familiar words come back. We eat <i>mákos haluska</i>, not <i>mákos tészta</i>. In our soup, I put <i>murok</i> (dialect form for “carrot”), not <i>sárgarépa</i>. I say <i>bánka</i>, <i>tumbocska</i> (Slavic borrowings equivalent to <i>befőttés üveg</i> “jar” and <i>éjjeliszekrény</i> “nightstand”). These words are intimate and home-like to me. Since we’re so far—really far from Transcarpathia—these native terms, this mother-tongue, evoke a longing for home. And as long as we use them, we remain Transcarpathian Hungarians—distinct, not just another Hungarian, as everyone around here is. Hungarian language connects all Hungarians worldwide. But we can speak Hungarian in such a way that preserves our roots. Through speech, I announce: “I’m from Transcarpathia, and I still belong to it a little bit.”</p>

Our research confirms Sandow’s claim that “speakers can shift toward or away from linguistic features in order to construct a contextually desirable identity”^[33].

The apparent contradiction observed in informants’ linguistic behavior reveals the crucial dual function of linguistic features within migrant communities. While certain features—such as dialectal forms or Slavic loanwords—may be strategically suppressed or modified in public and formal settings to facilitate integration and avoid stigmatization, the very same features are actively preserved, valorized, and utilized in private or in-group contexts. In these intimate domains, they serve as vital symbols of identity, heritage, and emotional connection to the homeland. This creates a dynamic tension between the external pressures of linguistic assimilation and the internal need to maintain a distinct identity. Language thus becomes a private sanctuary of cultural preservation, even as public linguistic performance shifts. This nuance is critical to understanding the complex process of refugee integration, demonstrating that adaptation does not necessarily entail surrender.

5.8. Role of Dialectal Background

Of the 120 respondents, 46 were located within the northeastern dialect region at the time of completing the on-line questionnaire, while the remaining 74 had moved to the territories of other dialect regions of Hungary. Since the Hungarian dialects of Transcarpathia are classified as a northeastern dialect region, which is a continuation of the neighboring territorial language variants of Hungary, we investigated whether more people found differences between the Transcarpathian and Hungarian language variants among those who were in the territory of other dialect regions during data collection^[34].

As shown in **Table 2**, among respondents placed within a dialect environment similar to their Transcarpathian speech, significantly fewer attributed a difference between Transcarpathian and Hungarian standard variants; conversely, respondents living outside the north-eastern dialect region were significantly more likely to perceive such differences ($\chi^2 = 2.21$; $df = 1$; $p = 0.137$; $p > 0.05$).

Table 2. Evaluation of Hungarian-language differences between native Hungarian speakers in Hungary proper and Transcarpathian Hungarian speakers, by respondents’ place of residence in Hungary (n = 120).

Do you think that Hungarians in Hungary speak differently than we, Transcarpathian Hungarians? Are there differences in the use of the Hungarian language between Hungarians in Hungary and Transcarpathia?	Yes, there is a difference		No, there is no difference		Total
	people	%	people	%	
northeastern dialect region	39	84.8	7	15.2	46
other dialect regions	70	94.6	4	5.4	74
Total	109	90.8	11	9.2	120

Although the difference did not reach statistical significance ($\chi^2 = 2.21$; $p = 0.137$), the distribution suggests a tendency worth noting: respondents who settled in dialectally similar regions were somewhat less likely to report differences. This “linguistic buffer” effect implies that geographical and dialectal proximity may soften the perception of linguistic distance, even if the present sample size prevents firm statistical conclusions. Future studies with larger datasets could test whether this tendency holds more generally.

6. Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, recruitment relied on institutional contacts and convenience

sampling (questionnaire invitations were sent primarily via the Rákóczi College network), resulting in a response rate of approximately 20% (120/600). Consequently, the sample cannot be considered representative of the entire Transcarpathian Hungarian population who relocated to Hungary. Second, some analyses (e.g., χ^2 tests comparing subsamples by dialectal region) may be underpowered given the cell sizes; non-significant p-values (e.g. $\chi^2(1) = 2.21$, $p = 0.137$) should therefore be interpreted as indicating no robust evidence of an effect in this sample, rather than conclusive absence of a real effect. Future research with larger samples would be required to test these tendencies more definitively. Third, self-report data are subject to recall and social-desirability biases, particularly on sensitive topics such as perceived stigma. Finally, because interviews and

questionnaires were collected in the immediate and short-term aftermath of displacement, the findings primarily reflect early adaptation processes; longitudinal follow-up (some of which is underway) will be necessary to capture longer-term trajectories.

7. Summary

As Szilágyi (2008: 106) aptly observes: “The Hungarian language in the Carpathian Basin changes not only within a single country but, given the current historical situation, simultaneously in eight different countries, and the language changes in each country depend on different factors. As a result, specific variants of Hungarian have developed in each country which, although not so divergent that people cannot easily understand one another, do have a number of relatively easily identifiable features. For this reason, we usually speak of linguistic differentiation”^[35]. This is a natural process—one that reflects how administrative borders shape the social networks of speakers, encouraging convergence inside a state while promoting divergence across borders^[36].

Language change famously occurs in tandem with social change—as long established in sociolinguistic theory^[37]. In the case of Transcarpathian Hungarians, the transition from a multilingual context in Ukraine to a more monolingual Hungarian-speaking environment engendered notable shifts in their linguistic behaviour. As newcomers in Hungary, many speakers consciously adopt a more standardised Hungarian register in order to assimilate into the host society. Yet—paradoxically—their distance from home reinforces the symbolic value of those speech elements that they bring with them: dialectal terms and Slavic borrowings retain warmth, familiarity, and identity-laden meaning.

Over thirty years ago, an article titled “Linguistic Difficulties of Hungarian Refugees from Transylvania” documented how refugees arriving in Hungary from Romania at the end of the 1980s “encounter challenges of adaptation at work, in schools, and within local communities,” and how their integration was obstructed by frequently negative evaluations of their Hungarian language use^[20]. Indeed, similar patterns have been reported in subsequent refugee waves—after the Yugoslav wars in the mid-1990s and again following 24 February 2022—when thousands of Hungarians crossed into Hungary to escape the terrors and uncertainty of armed

conflict. The findings of the present research indicate that persistent linguistic prejudice continues to complicate the integration process for refugees in Hungary.

Susan Gal observes that speech varieties do not merely reflect but—through performative acts—construct social meaning^[37]. These meanings, she argues, both signal and sustain social differentiation. More precisely, Gal posits that, in studying sociolinguistic differentiation, one must attend to how interlocutors deliberately exploit subtle linguistic differences to negotiate roles, identities, and interactional stances^[37]. As Szilágyi cautions, “the unity of the Hungarian language can be preserved only by recognising that Hungarian can be spoken in different ways—and that this is entirely proper”^[35]. When Transcarpathian Hungarians, who relocated to Hungary in the wake of Russian aggression against Ukraine, observe differences between their home variety and the Hungarian they encounter in Hungary, this awareness also functions as a marker of identity—one tied to their Transcarpathian roots, and which (to some extent) distinguishes them from Hungarians born in Hungary. At the same time, the sociolinguistic literature makes clear that, in certain circumstances, people may feel they still “speak the same language” despite regional or other linguistic differences^[38], and this holds true for members of the Hungarian speech community irrespective of whether they reside in Hungary. Despite its internal variety, Hungarian remains one of the most significant components—and indeed a core symbolic pillar—of Hungarian national identity.

8. Conclusions

At the outset of this study, we referred to Flubacher and Yeung’s conceptualisation of integration discourses. Based on the examples presented here, we contend that the case of Transcarpathian Hungarians arriving in Hungary from Ukraine demonstrates that the same mechanisms—categorisation, selection, and activation—that Yeung and Flubacher identified in different-language migration contexts also emerge in adaptation processes between varieties of the same language^[11].

- 1) Categorisation – Our study illustrates how the linguistic differences of Transcarpathian Hungarian refugees (e.g., dialectal forms, Slavic loanwords, formal address conventions) can lead to differentiation or stigmatisation in

Hungary. This corresponds to Yeung and Flubacher’s notion of categorisation, in which linguistic features function as tools for marking social hierarchies and boundaries.

- 2) Selection – While the present case does not involve formal citizenship language examinations or immigration point systems, a subtle “filter” nonetheless operates: alignment with what is perceived as “beautiful” or “correct” Standard Hungarian influences social acceptance and workplace integration.
- 3) Activation – The conscious linguistic self-monitoring by our participants, their abandonment of certain features brought from home in the interest of “blending in,” and their efforts to address gaps in official register competence align closely with Yeung and Flubacher’s description of the neoliberal imperative to render oneself “marketable” and the associated shifting of responsibility onto the individual.

These findings further demonstrate that the three processes are not only abstract categories but observable mechanisms in our data. For instance, the perception of Transcarpathian features such as *kell lesz* or Slavic loanwords corresponds to categorisation, whereby linguistic forms become markers of social hierarchies and “otherness.” The evaluation of “beautiful” or “pure” Hungarian illustrates selection, since implicit norms of correctness filter who is regarded as a legitimate speaker. Finally, the conscious self-monitoring reported in the interviews—avoiding dialectal items in order to “blend in”—is a form of activation, aligning closely with Yeung and Flubacher’s description of the neoliberal imperative of self-investment. By explicitly mapping our results onto these three processes, the present case provides a same-language extension of their framework, showing how integration discourses function even without a formal second-language boundary.

As discussed above, these subtle but important differences complicate integration even in same-language contexts. Rather, it often involves more subtle yet significant processes of adaptation. In this type of migration—where the country of origin and the host country share the same national language—linguistic adaptation is less about acquiring the basics of vocabulary or grammar, and more about navigating finer distinctions within the linguistic continuum, such as dialects, registers, or sociolects.

In “same-language” migration, the focus of adaptation shifts from overcoming communication barriers to negotiating identity. This may involve subtle shifts in dialect or register, or even the conscious rejection of certain marked, stigmatized, or politically charged language varieties due to their sociopolitical connotations. Adaptation, in such cases, includes navigating the socio-political meanings embedded in linguistic choices.

Moreover, within a linguistically fragmented space such as the Hungarian-speaking area—divided by state borders—migrants bring additional layers of linguistic diversity into the host society’s linguistic landscape through their specific regional dialects, sociolects, or individual linguistic biographies. Adaptation thus becomes a process of navigating “diversity within diversity,” rather than a straightforward shift from L1 to L2.

As with migrants who speak entirely different languages, the linguistic environment of the host country also becomes diversified in these cases, and ideally, adaptation is a two-way process. Even though newcomers are not required to learn a new language, they may nevertheless experience pressure to abandon their original dialects or linguistic features that are deeply tied to their identities. This can result in feelings of “linguistic shame” or the perceived loss of a part of their inherited linguistic legacy.

Because these refugees speak the same language as the host society, and there is no apparent “language barrier” between them, host countries often fail to recognize the migrants’ adaptation challenges and, consequently, do not implement specific language support programs—assuming that there are no linguistic issues to address. However, this can leave migrants without assistance in navigating subtle but important linguistic and cultural differences. While not constituting full-fledged language barriers, unfamiliar dialectal features or a lack of competence in specific professional registers can still hinder refugees’ access to employment or their ability to communicate effectively in formal settings.

These insights have direct implications for policy. The assumption that “no language barrier exists” in same-language migration risks overlooking the practical and psychological burdens migrants face when navigating dialectal variation and official registers. Integration programmes should therefore extend beyond basic language training to include orientation in formal registers, legal-administrative

terminology, and the sociolinguistic norms of the host society. Tailored support—such as workshops, mentoring networks, or targeted language assistance—would reduce linguistic stigma and help preserve migrants’ sense of identity while ensuring equal access to employment and services.

9. Future Research Directions

Two years later, in April 2024, we attempted to reconnect via e-mail with the 120 respondents who had completed the online questionnaire in 2022. At that time, only 59 of them remained in Hungary: 53 had returned to Ukraine (Transcarpathia), and 8 had moved on to other countries (two each in the Czech Republic, Germany, and England; one each in Ireland and Spain). We re-sent the questionnaire to those 59 still residing in Hungary; 53 completed and returned it. Of the 18 participants interviewed online in 2022, 11 were still in Hungary, and 8 agreed to be interviewed again. These follow-up interviews were conducted via Zoom in July and August 2024; the recordings are now transcribed, and the data are under analysis. These longitudinal data—collected two years after informants’ migration—promise to enrich understanding of the process of linguistic integration among Transcarpathian Hungarian refugees in Hungary.

Attitudes within the host community toward recent arrivals—and toward their language use or dialects—are known to significantly influence newcomers’ linguistic behaviour^[39]. Moreover, recent migration studies show that negative or ambivalent host attitudes can act as powerful barriers to sociolinguistic assimilation and self-confidence in heritage language use^[40]. Therefore, in the long term, it would be valuable to explore how Hungarian speakers in Hungary perceive both Transcarpathian Hungarian refugees and the language variants they bring with them.

Lastly, while our study focuses on one ethnolinguistic minority, these findings may also offer theoretical insights for researchers investigating the social and linguistic integration of the millions of Ukrainian refugees now dispersed across European host countries.

Author Contributions

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript. The authors contributed equally to the preparation of this publication.

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Data Availability Statement

Data supporting the study results are available upon request (without personal data). Please contact the corresponding author for access to the data.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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