

Awareness, self-discipline, individual colours

Conversation with Professor Géza Balázs,
Head of the Speech Culture Committee
of the SZFE



Photo: Gyöngyi Schwarzenberger-Ludván

Teaching speech has always had an important role at the University of Theatre and Film Arts (and its predecessors). What is known about its past?

■ As a linguist, as a linguaphil, I always knew that actors were taught by such eminent speech teachers as Adorján Nagy, József Gáti, Sándor Fischer and Imre Montágh. Legends have grown up around some of them, and they are often mentioned by long-serving actors. But when I read István Nánay's book about the history of the SZFE (*Tanodától – egyetemig. Az intézményes magyar színház- és filmművészképzés száznegyven éve [From the Acting School to the University. One Hundred and Forty Years of Institutional Hungarian Theatre and Film Education]*), it became even more obvious to me that there was no period when the importance of speech training in theatre arts was not emphasized in some way. And so it was in the life of the acting school, the academy, the college and later the university. The speech criterion appeared at the foundation of the Theatre School in 1865. The requirements at the time were: 'For admission, it is desirable to have... a nice, faultless, clear pronunciation in drama, and a nice clear voice, and a standard ear for music in opera faculty'. Zoltán Várkonyi (1974–1979) was a fierce advocate of speech training. "Everyday language – I'm not talking about new words, I'm not talking about slang, I'm talking about emphasis, the value of sounds – is deteriorating, and we're seeing this with the candidates." Therefore, based on his experience in England, he proposed a secondary school where gymnastics and speech would be given priority, with an emphasis on the theatrical needs, and poetry and drama would be given greater emphasis in the teaching of literature. Although linguists are reluctant to use the term 'language deterioration', they do not deny that there are plenty of language use problems – which can be corrected. And even critics constantly complain about the use of language on stage and in film. The importance of speech training has increased even more since the SZFE started to offer media training.

What is the scientific basis of speech teaching?

■ The quality of public discourse has been discussed since antiquity. The rhetoric that is still alive and relevant today was born in antiquity. The first oratorical studies were primarily about judicial and then political speech, but the importance of ecclesiastical oratory soon grew, and, if you think about it, these are all connected with the theatre; but Aristotle, for example, mentions the special

language of tragedy in his *Poetics*: ‘Flavoured’ speech in my definition is the one which has written, harmony and tune...’ “In his *Rhetoric*, he formulates a total view of speech, which today is mostly related to acting: ‘The way of thinking includes all that is to be done by speech: proof, refutation, arousal of emotions – pity, fear, anger, and so on – and also magnification and diminution.” And he also mentions the art of speech specifically: ‘The art of words uses only prose or poetry, and the latter may be either in mixed form or in the same verse throughout, but there is still no summary name for it’. From the Greeks onwards, rhetoric has occupied an important place among the sciences. It has been taught regularly since the Middle Ages and has had a great influence on the use of language in art. In linguistics, it is only since the 20th century that the subject of speech has been dealt with in depth – until then, linguists were mainly interested in linguistic elements, word types, word classes, parts of speech and sentences. Saussure already introduced the task of researching living speech. However, it is only in the age of technological progress in the 20th century (sound and image recording and transmission) and the communication facilities that make use of them (film, radio, television, theatre, multimedia) when this became increasingly necessary and possible. In Hungary, language education has a centuries-old tradition, but speech education can only be counted from the 20th century, with the publication of Kodály Zoltán’s manifesto. In recent times, the scientific background of linguistics has been enormously strengthened. This is due to the (instrumental) phonetic research that has become established in linguistics and to the deepening possibilities of speech technology. Together, the two can be collectively referred to as speech science. Rhetorical approaches and the emergence of psycholinguistics have also made a major contribution to speech science. Speech science also includes language pedagogy and speech techniques dealing with speech defects and disorders, and communication theory and practice dealing with communication disorders in general.

What is the practical history of speech teaching?

■ I have already mentioned that in our traditional school system there has always been rhetoric education. This was abolished in 1948, but for a while it was replaced by a similar subject called Speech and Reasoning. Older people remember it, they say they liked it because it was a good class to talk in. At the dawn of the change of regime, rhetoric crept back into the Hungarian language teaching,

which was expanded as Hungarian grammar and communication. It has its place in the curriculum and could be practised, but I often hear that there is no time to hear the students giving oral answers, it is quicker and easier for them to fill in tests. According to some estimates, a primary school pupil speaks in public in a rhetorical situation in school for only a few minutes a year. And the same is true in high school and university. In mass education, oral examinations have declined, and many forms of education have no oral entrance examinations. Therefore, neglected speech teaching was organised through diversions, for those who have succeeded. Such by-passes include elocution, rhetoric and recitation competitions for all types of schools, sponsored by social associations, foundations and institutions. It is a different matter that the methodology of these, which was developed in the 1960s, has not changed, is in many respects outdated and often lays down pseudo-rules of pronunciation, which tend to cause harm. As for the detours, I would definitely highlight the recitation competitions, which have a huge boost for those who want to work with speech at an artistic level. At the College of Theatre and Film Arts, for example, Nádasdy Kálmán revived recitation competitions during his rectorship (1964–1974), after which they disappeared again. The many formal and informal competitions had and still have a stimulating effect on actor training. Many of our actors boast a Kazinczy Medal or a recognition received in a recitation competition. It is a fact, that such a confirmed result makes a significant contribution to an audition for admission.

Institutions that employ “speakers” have also noticed the lack of pedagogical foundations. Therefore, in 1976, Hungarian Radio set up its Language and Microphone Committee, which operated until 2011: it provided scientifically based training and examination requirements for radio speakers. As I was a member of this committee from 1992 to 2021, and its chairman for its last ten years, I know its activities well. We worked together with great linguists (Pál Fábrián, István Szathmári, József Bencédy, Imre Wacha), great radio presenters (Ferenc Bózsöny) and excellent radio professionals. The language committee played more of a consultative role, analysing programmes, genres, radio attitudes and styles. Specific analyses were always discussed with the programme producers. The analyses and the professional materials (textbooks) resulting from them were published by the Education Department of Hungarian Radio. The Education Department ran the continuous radio speech training. Only after completing that training could the microphone examination, inevitable for speaking on the radio, be taken. Those who met the strictest requirements were given a microphone licence

Zoltán Kodály: Let's put a stop to the deterioration of our pronunciation! (Said on Radio on 18 September 1938.)

"There is only one language here whose pronunciation is not taken care of by anyone: the Hungarian. Either they think that everyone knows it, or they think that it doesn't matter: we can pronounce it right or wrong, but we understand each other. This lack of care is evident: anyone who has an open ear for Hungarian life knows how much Hungarian pronunciation has deteriorated over the last two decades. The deterioration of pronunciation is just a symptom of the general deterioration of the language. [...] Nothing is more characteristic of a language than its particular pronunciation. It's like the fragrance of a flower, the flavour of the wine, the fire of the enamel, the opal. To recognise the language far before you even understand the word. Every language has its own timbre, tempo, rhythm, melody, in short, its own music. More and more people are blowing Hungarian in a false way. [...]

So what do we do? There are two reasons for mispronunciation. One is simply a lack of language skills. When it's a foreign language, we take it for granted that mispronunciation is only half knowledge. Why is it not natural in Hungarian, too? If you want to speak Hungarian, learn to pronounce it. This is just self-evident.

We cannot give up foreign languages. In fact, we must strive to ensure that every educated Hungarian knows at least one perfectly. But let us use our knowledge of foreign languages so that our knowledge of Hungarian gains, not loses. We learn Hungarian again in parallel with the foreign language. Let us take note of all its musical differences and the better we master the pronunciation of the foreign language, the more conscious we can become of Hungarian. [...]

And here we come to the second cause of mispronunciation, the more serious one. If one is determined to learn the correct Hungarian pronunciation, it is only a matter of time and diligence. It is certain that those who have not inherited it will have to work hard to acquire it. Keeping it is no less work.

The work to be done is big. Specialists are needed to discover and organise the basic facts of pronunciation. It will be up to the educational authorities to ensure that the findings of science are disseminated through schools. The first steps have already been taken on both counts. But this can only be brought to life by a mass movement. If we can get all Hungarians interested, no one will care whether we pronounce a word one way or another. A language is the creation of millions, and it is only truly alive if more people use it consciously. In the Radio, in addition to presentations on the correct use of the language, experts will also be dealing with the details of pronunciation. I urge our distinguished listeners to listen with the attention and interest that the language issue, the genuine fundamental cause of the nation, deserves."

for announcers or presenters. This was followed by a reporter's and a specialist reporter's licence. This may show that everyone could find their place in the system. To give an example of the two extreme positions: a radio announcer could not be speech impaired, but for a specialist reporter this was not a disqualifying factor. In the 1980s, Hungarian Television had a similar committee. The former language committees were replaced by a so-called Montágh board in MTVA, but it did not take over the system of microphone licences. And after the regime change, communication and speech training was introduced into the training of managers, with a variety of mixed methods and topics – but the point is that the need for it was recognised, so much so that individuals and companies paid huge sums of money to develop speaking skills. A number of private rhetoric schools and speech training courses – in the latter case also known as fashionable voice hygiene – are advertised on the web. I myself have been asked to develop a course in speech-writing and delivery and it has been an incredible success. This shows that there is a huge demand for effective speech training

What are the main research centres and textbooks in speech science?

■ The only department of phonetics is at ELTE's Faculty of Humanities, but speech research is also carried out at the ELKH Language Research Centre and the University of Technology. Phonetics, which is specifically linguistic (segmental and suprasegmental), is not relevant for our purposes, since we are not interested in the theory of speech production. In practical speech teaching, the works of speech teachers previously associated with SZFE (e.g., Sándor Fischer's *A beszéd művészete [The Art of Speech]*, the textbooks by Imre Montágh: *Figyelem vagy fegyelem?! [Attention or Discipline?!]*, or *Nyelvművesség. A beszéd művészete [Language Art. The Art of Speech]*). For the study of speech defects, I recommend the books *Frequent Speech Defects* edited by László Szabó, and *Gyakori beszédhibák a gyermekkorban [Frequent Speech Defects in Childhood]* by Imre Montágh, Nelli Montághné Riener and Etelka Vinczéné Bíró. You may also find useful the work on *A hangképzés és zavarai, beszédzavarok [Voice production and disorders, speech disorders]* edited by László Surján and Tibor Frint. For the theory of rhetoric, I recommend the works of Anna Adamikné Jászó, Petra Aczél and Imre Wacha. I would like to draw particular attention to the works of Imre Wacha – especially because he practically developed media-based speech training in Hungary. In the 1960s, there was a pronunciation conference in Eger,

where it was decided to create a manual of colloquial Hungarian pronunciation. In the end, it was only László Elekfi and Imre Wacha's huge individual undertaking. *Az értelmes beszéd hangzása [The Sound of Intelligent Speech]* (2004), but Imre Wacha has also laid the foundations for our speech culture in several other works: *A tiszta beszéd [The Clear Speech]* (2015), *Az értelmes beszéd [Intelligent Speech]* (2015), *Igényesen magyarul [Quality Speech in Hungarian]*, *A helyes kiejtés kézikönyve [A manual for correct pronunciation]* (2010). I also have some works that can be classified here: *Médiakommunikáció. A nyelvi közszolgálatosság [Media communication The Language of Public Service]* (1996), *Médianyelv. Az igényes sajtó/média nyelve [The Language of Quality Press/Media]* (2000), *A nyilvános megszólalás esztétikája [The Aesthetics of Public Speaking]* (2002). And this was the purpose of my former Duna television series, *Hey, hey, orthography* and *Hey, hey, correct speech*.

What are the most common speech defects and speech disorders today?

■ There are, so to speak, eternal, i.e. always characteristic of a part of the population, voice disorders: hoarseness, mutation disorder, as well as typical speech disorders: lisp, nasalization, fast speech, stammering. If we look at speech disorders in the overall communicative context, many more phenomena emerge, and these can be treated with little help from a speech teacher, but rather with rhetorical or, in more serious cases, psychological help. These include communication disorders resulting from disturbances of attention and thinking (incoherent communication, circumlocution, phonetic associations, the communication-distorting consequences of delusions) and speech disorders such as compulsive speech, verbosity, excessively soft or loud speech... The odd thing is that, perhaps due to some habits of our time or perhaps because of more attention, there seems to be an increasing number of children and adults with speech defects and disorders. But, as the media now say, "the good news is" that some of these are outgrown by young people, or relatively well corrected by the early twenties. And let me add something that a speech teacher would never say: a little speech impediment is not a problem! It is neither necessary nor possible for everyone to have the same exact ("regular") articulation. In fact, let me reassure you ladies: a minor speech impediment can be "sexy". But this is not to say that for those who speak for a living, i.e. in the old-new media, radio and television broadcasters, spokespeople, communicators, teachers, clergymen, public

figures and, of course, actors, good speaking skills, based on good articulation, are not a priority.

And what about dialects, or more precisely the use of dialects in every day language or on stage?

■ Anyone who watches old Hungarian films may have noticed that in the period between the two world wars and until about the end of the 1950s, the language used by actors was much more colourful, for example, it was natural for an actor to have a dialect peculiarity. After that, only a few actors retained their dialect pronunciation, and they were the only ones used to portray the peasant world. Such were Teri Horváth and Ádám Szirtes. The imitation of the vernacular is often unsuccessful and therefore arouses disapproval or controversy among experts – such was the case with the television series Sándor Rózsa, which was accompanied by a controversy over actors who did not produce the ö sound of ‘Szöged’ professionally. Today, we hardly have any actors who speak the dialect. There is no doubt that dialects (regional dialects) have declined, but they are alive. Hungarian dialects are alive all over the country and beyond its borders, and contrary to the former prevailing opinion of linguists, they do not wish to die out. And dialects are of great value: partly because of their linguistic tradition, partly because of the specific identity of small communities, partly because of the emotional identification. In the current situation, my practical advice is that those who still have their dialect should preserve it, use it courageously in the situation, and also strive to learn the vernacular. Public service radio should not report news in dialect, but a local correspondent should feel free to use their dialect. On the stage, Hamlet should not be performed in the Palóc dialect, but there could be room for dialect in a popular play – and not just in radio comedy shows, where there is a tendency to use offensive dialect imitations! Let me give you a beautiful, even touching example! Björn Runeborg’s Swedish voice play *Az autókereskedő* (*The Car Dealer*) tells the story of a young man from Gotland who goes to work as a car dealer in a big Swedish city, but is told that he cannot be a car dealer with such a terrible dialect. So, the young man of Sweden, who speaks the dialect of Gotland, enrolls in a Swedish language course. How do you translate that into Hungarian? The Hungarian Radio asked László Csendes, a member of the Thália Theatre in Kosice, to perform the role in the Palóc dialect. I recommend listening to the voice play to everyone to understand the ethics of

using dialects, and I also recommend learning about and appreciating the radio play genre in general. Once upon a time, most actors were employed in radio plays, and the “pagoda” (lobby) of Hungarian Radio was always full of actors.

What tasks do you see in the training of actors in the field of speech training?

■ There is also speech training at the SZFE, and talking to students I know that there is demand for it. Those who come here know that their most important tool is the voice, and good speech shaped by a good voice. Let me tell you an anecdote. In one of our buildings, I entered the men’s restroom and witnessed a bizarre scene. I heard this: cím, cin, citrom, címez, cél, cégér, cica, cián, cifra, cinkos, cédula, cérna... (all Hungarian words beginning with the letter c) (title, squeak, lemon, address, target, signet, kitty, cyan, fancy, fancy, tag, thread...) Anywhere else I would have been shocked..., but not so much there, while washing my hands I found out that a young drama student was practising, apologised, but only here, in the men’s toilet, he found a mirror... I didn’t tell him that I teach this and how appropriate I think this act is. But seriously! I’ve been hearing the complaint for years, and for some time I’ve been experiencing it myself: there are a lot of actors with speech impediments. The peak was a severely speech impaired Adam, not so long ago. Because, as I may have already alluded to, in a character role, speech impediments may go unnoticed. Of course, you can direct a speech impaired Adam and Eve, but I wouldn’t. The other: the volume. Very often I can’t understand what is being said on stage. Of course, it can be a concept, for example multitasking so that you don’t always understand the text. But let this be an exception. The third: the poetry recitation. It’s completely regressed. And yet poetry, with its splendid verse interpretation, has a therapeutic effect. I think it is very important that as many people as possible recite poetry, and that everyone should listen to and recite poetry every day!

I would also add that the state of speech culture, the phenomenon of speech defects, speech disorders, should not be considered as a disease – by this I mean not to be considered an illness. Every person has their own idiolect, their own phonetic formation, their own use of language. Obviously, a major or multiple speech impediment impairs communication; but let’s not consider it a medical case. At best, we should gently bring it to the person’s attention, indicate that there is a solution, and of course not necessarily that they should choose a profession that involves public or artistic ‘speaking’ with such features.

In many cases, it is a minor or major speech impediment that triggers the desire to prove oneself. It is said of Demosthenes, the great orator of antiquity, that he overcame his inhibition by a ruthless self-discipline: he put pebbles in his mouth and recited on the beach.

A working group on the culture of speech was set up at the SZFE. With what plans?

■ When I came to SZFE after 38 years at ELTE, where I had taught rhetoric and communication for a very long time, I immediately proposed the creation of a working group on the culture of speech. This was done. In my first year here, I brought the national Kossuth oratorical competition here, from which the drama students had been excluded for some reason. In November 2022, we held the national final at the National Theatre, and we would like to continue to link the competition to our university and the theatre. Of course, the previous organisers will also remain: the ELTE Faculty of Primary School and Kindergarten Teacher Education, the International Society for Hungarian Language and Culture and the Petőfi Cultural Agency. Preparatory programmes, meetings and training sessions will be launched from the middle of the year for the final in November 2023. Personally, I would also encourage more articulation and thematic recitation competitions. Another area is speech training. As I am not a speech teacher myself, I would actually like to learn from speech teachers first, I would like to learn about the problems. Rhetoric and other communication training can be superimposed on the profound work of speech teachers, and these are my own fields of specialisation. So the two are not independent. And the third area is the development of a so-called speech exam. I have been asked by the management of the SZFE to organise a series of speech courses for internal and external actors (on a fee basis for external actors), which could help them in the media, in theatre work and in public life. As we have the experience of the Radio Language Committee in the past and as there is no such training in Hungary, we are working on developing and introducing this. The working group on the culture of speech will also seek to report on the latest developments in speech science to the university community, for example in *Urania*, the university's scientific journal.

The interview was conducted by Zsolt Antal