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# The Hungarian language and its imagined antiquity



King Attila, the Turul bird in his shield  
(Chronicon Pictum, 1358)

**Language Myths: A workshop on the political  
uses of historical languages**

Copenhagen (*Kappanhágó* 'Capon Pass', according  
to the historian and pseudolinguist István Horvát  
[1784–1846]),

January 16, 2025

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# 1. What is the Hungarian language (made of)?

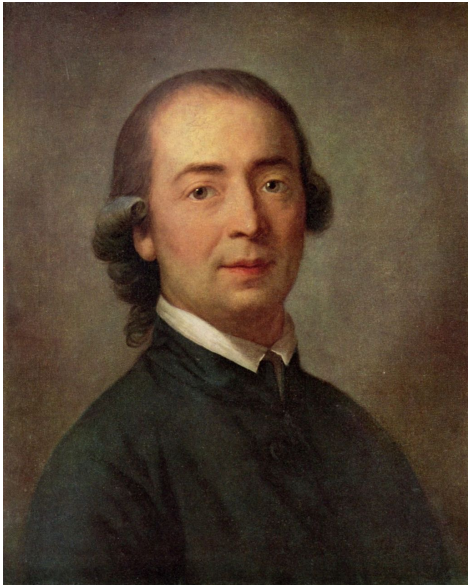


# “Idioma incomparabile”: ethnolinguistic exceptionalism

- Hungarian – unlike the Germanic, Slavic, Romance, or Finnic state languages in Europe, but similarly to Greek, Albanian, or Armenian – is a quasi-isolate, lacking recognizable relatives, conspicuously different
- National history-writing and popular identity-building in Hungary is based on
  - medieval chronicles and legends, written long before modern history-writing, before the birth of modern historical-comparative linguistics or the discovery of Finno-Ugric language relatedness in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century
  - the ethnolinguistic assumption (*nyelvében él a nemzet* ‘the nation lives in its language’)
  - a persistent sense of endangerment and looming extinction – being under attack



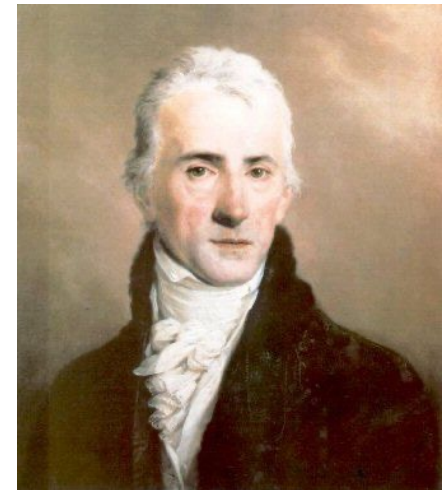
# Herder, the Bad Guy “who prophesied our extinction”



Johann Gottfried (von)  
Herder, 1744–1803

- “Da sind sie jetzt unter Slawen, Deutschen, Wlachen und anderen Völkern der geringere Theil der Landeseinwohner, und nach Jahrhunderten wird man vielleicht ihre Sprache kaum mehr finden.” (*Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, 1784–1791)
- “Herder is a false prophet. The Hungarian language and people will never die out, as long as a philosophical soul will reign over Europe, as it does now. A non-vandal ruler will accept a thing or another just in order to let a beautiful language survive, a language with a character of its own, a language that cannot be found anywhere else.” (Ferenc Kazinczy in a private letter from 1810, quoted in Hites 2010: 29, my translation)

Ferenc Kazinczy,  
1759–1831



# What do linguists know about the Hungarian language?

- A quasi-isolate branch of Uralic, with a long prehistory of migration (traceable mainly with the help of loanword strata: Iranian, (West) Turkic, Slavic, etc.) and separate development
- Unmistakably Uralic, yet marked by numerous Europeanisms and other possibly contact-induced innovations (definite and indefinite articles, “Slavic-type” tense system, “Central-Eastern European” verb prefixes, finite subordinate clauses with subordinating conjunctions/relative pronouns...)
- Written tradition since the Middle Ages, radical language reform and standardization from the early 19th century on



# What do (Hungarian) laypeople know about the Hungarian language?



- General exceptionalism: a language totally different from all others
- Genealogy: official academic received wisdom (Uralic language family) vs. increasingly popular alternative ideas (descent from the languages of the Huns, the Sumerians, or almost any other language of a famous ancient civilization), combined with conspiracy theories (the Uralic relatedness as an evil plot applied first by the Habsburg rulers, then by the Communists, to deprive the proud Magyars of their glorious past). In 2016, more than every fourth Hungarian thought that “the Finno-Ugric theory is false” (Krekó 2018: 139)

Hungarian is the primal language carrying the code of creation. MAGYAROK 'Hungarians' contains the words *ma* 'today', *mag* 'seed', *agy* 'brain' etc.

**TUDDTAD,**  
hogy a teremtés  
nyelvét beszéled?

A magyar nyelv  
egy kódolt kozmikus  
ősnyelv! Benne van  
a tudás, és nem  
hasonlítható össze  
semmilyen más  
nyelvrendszerrel  
ami képes lenne  
erre.

— Agya  
— Agy  
— Mag (népe)  
— Ma  
**MAGYAROK** ← Korai mag!

OK=ISTEN, nélküle nincs élet!  
Isten(TE IS ÉN IS)  
O=Nőiség K=hímség  
(bennünk)van az OK  
**Zsoltárok könyve:**  
Istenek vagytok ti és  
a Felségesnek fiai ti mindnyájan

## 2. The most ancient language?

Világegyetemünk felépítője, valamint az emberi tudat fejlődési útja.  
Magyar nyelvi képességgel olvasható, ősi, szent tanítási rendszerek!

# What makes a language “ancient”?

Criteria easily applicable to Hungarian:

- Uniqueness (the less related to something else, the more “unique”)
- Ancient separation (identification of “language” with the nation as a (purportedly eternally) distinct unit)

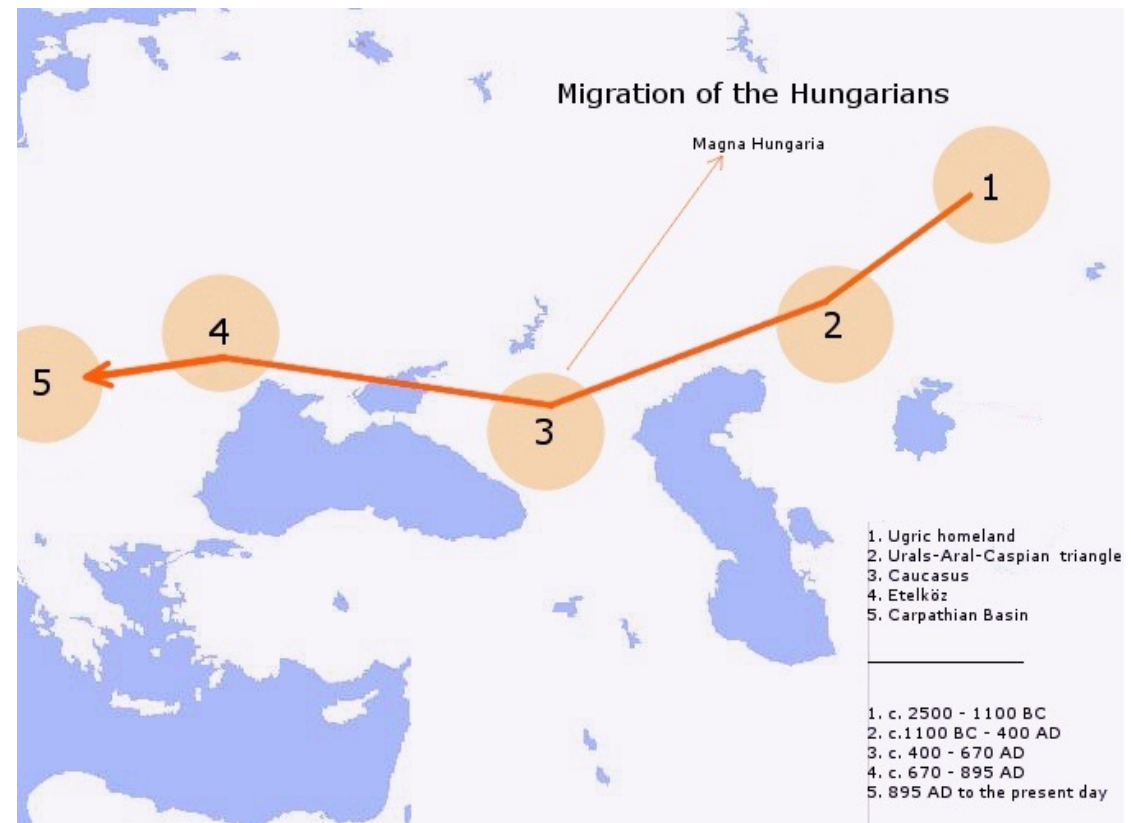
More problematic with respect to Hungarian:

- Conservativeness (identification of “language change” with “decay”)
- Ancient documentation (identification of “language” with “writing”)
- Ancient location (identification of “language” with “homeland”)



# Genealogy: long separate development

- Proto-Ugric, possibly rather a Sprachbund-like group than a valid node in the family tree, broke up 3000 years ago. Since then, no documented contacts with other Uralic languages. Does this make Hungarian an “old” or “ancient” language?



Source: Wikipedia, based on Péter Veres, “A magyar nép etnogenézise” (*História* XXIX, 2007/4).


# “Our unique language”

- MI, A MAGYAR NEMZET TAGJAI, az új évezred kezdetén, felelősséggel minden magyarért, kinyilvánítjuk az alábbiakat:
- Büszkék vagyunk arra, hogy Szent István királyunk ezer évvel ezelőtt szilárd alapokra helyezte a magyar államot, és hazánkat a keresztény Európa részévé tette. [...]
- Vállaljuk, hogy örökségünket, **egyedülálló nyelvünket**, a magyar kultúrát, a magyarországi nemzetiségek nyelvét és kultúráját, a Kárpát-medence természet adta és ember alkotta értékeit ápoljuk és megóvjuk.

[‘We, members of the Hungarian nation (...) commit ourselves to cherish and protect our heritage, **our unique language**, the Hungarian culture, the languages and cultures of the ethnic groups in Hungary (...)]. Preamble (“The National Creed”) to the Hungarian Fundamental Law.]

# A language that never changes?

“Do we know that even today we can understand the text of the Old Hungarian Lamentation of Virgin Mary [early 13th century], as its vocabulary is in use even today? An educated Englishman cannot read Shakespeare’s plays without a dictionary (...) Our language has maintained its grammar and lexicon. It didn’t want to fade, to dissolve into the great vortex of languages, because it has been mature for millennia already, and will only need minimal changes!”



**Tudjuk-e , hogy az Ómagyar Mária-siralom szövegét mi még a mai napig értjük, hiszen szókincsét, mind a mai napig használjuk?**

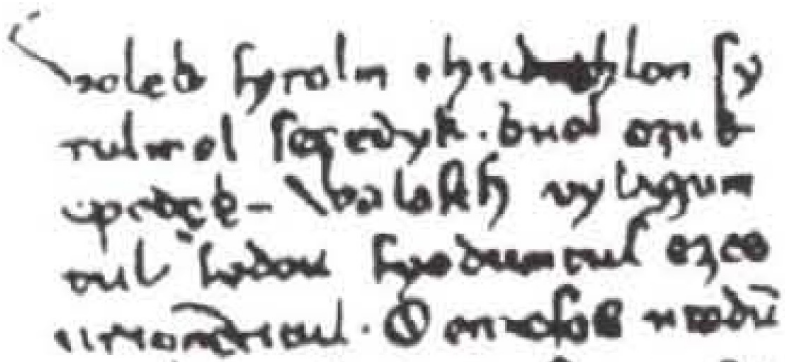
**Shakespeare drámáit, a művelt angol már csak szótár segítségével képes elolvasni, mivel annyit változott nyelvük az elmúlt 440 év során.**

**A miénk, megtartotta nyelvtanát és szókincsét. Nem volt hajlandó belesimulni, beleolvadni a nagy nyelvi forgatagba, hiszen több ezer éve kiforrott és csak minimális változtatásokra van szüksége!**

Source: Anonymous Powerpoint presentation circulating in social media



## Actually...



Volek fyrolm thudothlon fy-  
rolmol fepedyk . buol ozuk  
epedek .. Walaſth vylagum-  
tul fydou fyodumtul ezcs  
urumētuul : (...)

*Balék siralm tudatlan; si-  
ralmal sēpedék, / búal aszok,  
epedék. Bálaszt Bilágum-  
túl, / zsidou, fiadumtúl, ézēs  
ürümemtúl.*

Valék (*voltam*) siralom-tudatlan (*nem ismertem a sírást*),  
siralommal ?süppedek/?sepedek (?), búval aszok, epedek.  
Választ világomtól, zsidó, fiacskámtól, édes örömemtől.

‘I was unknowing of weeping [didn’t know what it means to weep],  
[now] I’m gashed (?) by weeping, consumed [and] languished by pain.  
He parts me from my world (my light), the Jew, from my dear son, my sweet joy.’  
(First lines of the Old Hungarian Lamentation of Virgin Mary.) (Vízkelety 1986)

## A language that never changes (2): The (fabricated) story of Sir John Bowring

The Magyar language stands afar off and alone..... It is moulded in a form essentially its own, and its construction and composition may be safely referred to an epoch when most of the living tongues of Europe either had no existence, or no influence on the Hungarian region. *It is a language in which there is a logic and mathematics with the adaptability and malleability of strength and chords [?]. The Englishman should be proud that his language indicates an epic of human history. One can show forth his [sic] origin, and alien layers can be distinguished in it, which gathered together during the contacts with different nations. Whereas the Hungarian language is like a rubble stone, consisting of only one piece on which the storm of time left not a scratch. It is not a calendar that adjusts to the changes of ages. This language is the oldest and most glorious monument of national sovereignty [?] and mental independence.*

(Attributed to Sir John Bowring (1792–1872), British traveller, economist, literary translator and diplomat, editor of *The Poetry of the Magyars* (1830) – from whose foreword the beginning of this quotation was taken. <https://www.nyest.hu/hirek/mit-mondott-sir-john-browning-a-magyar-nyelvrol> )

# Ancient documentation

- Esoteric ideas about the Szekler Runic script (possibly adopted from Turkic peoples before the arrival in Hungary but attested with certainty only in Medieval Transilvania)
- Recent attempt by Bence Fehér (2024) to interpret the runes (?) on the needle box of Jánoshida (from the 7th century AD) as “the earliest Hungarian text”, evidence of “pre-Conquest” presence of Hungarian speakers in the Pannonian basin





# Ancient location

- Established view: “Conquest” (*honfoglalás*) 896 AD
- Alternative ideas: “dual Conquest” (Gyula László), pre-Conquest presence as Huns or even earlier



“In mid-907, Hungarians are bracing themselves for a crucial battle. They have returned to their ancient homeland, and now they must once again defend it. (...) Since the conquest by our Hun ancestors, the Carpathian basin had been the European base of the rider peoples of the steppe. (...) The Hun union was followed by the Avar Khaganate. After 250 years, its power was crushed by Charlemagne’s knights in the early 9th century but the population held out in the Carpathian basin and lived to see the arrival of their relatives from the steppe of Etelköz, the similarly rider-nomad Hungarian tribes (...)”

Animated film “The Battle of Pozsony”, produced by the Institute of Hungarian Research in 2020 (my translation from the narration:

[https://youtu.be/oiNmszXx\\_js?si=jYM7nIO5VVzhL6zT](https://youtu.be/oiNmszXx_js?si=jYM7nIO5VVzhL6zT), 0’22”–, 1’40”–, 2’14”–)

### 3. Politicization of the “ancient” language



Golden deer from a Scythian grave  
(Wikimedia Commons)

The Wonder Deer at the  
parade of St Stephen's  
Day 2021



# Early Anti-Finno-Ugricism...

- Sajnovics's *Demonstratio* (1770) and the purported “relatedness with the most primitive peoples of Eurasia” triggered some angry reactions
  - Ábrahám Bárcsai (1742–1806): “*Sajnovics jármától óvjuk nemzetünket, / Ki Lapponiából hurczolja nyelvünket!*” [‘Let us protect our nation from the yoke of Sajnovics, / who is dragging our language from Lapponia!’; see also Aspaas & Kontler 2020: 380]
  - Flórián Mátyás, historian and philologist, in his inaugural speech at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1859 (quoted in Munkácsi 1898: 276, my translation): ‘They should respect our language with its noble distinctiveness, and if they really want to unjustly make us related with something else, let them choose a more civilized language and not connect us to the most miserable ones, for we are entitled to regard such an intentional humiliation as an offence.’



## ... and the traditional alternatives



Sándor Kőrösi Csoma (Kőrös, 1784 – Darjeeling, 1842),  
seeker of the roots of Hungarians in India, founder of  
Western Tibetology

Ármin Vámbéry (1832–1913), Turcologist, Orientalist,  
philologist and traveller, known as one of the last champions  
of Hungarian-Turkish relatedness in Hungarian academia



# “Turanism”

- The idea of ancient relatedness (with cultural-political implications) including both Uralic and “Altaic” languages: gains new “anti-Western” momentum in Hungary after 1920 (fantasies about China, Japan, Persia, India...) but is also exploited by the Horthy régime in contacts with Finland and Estonia
- Later stages of Hungarian Turanism in the late 1930s: a particularly fascinating period (Ablonczy 2018) because of the coexistence of radical (anti-Soviet/anti-Russian) Pan-Finno-Ugrism with alternative ideas of relatedness with Sumerian (and other languages of ancient cultures?)
- Fascistoid Turanism with racist tenets: “we are neither Aryan nor Semitic”

Költemények az V. finn-ugor kultúrkongresszus alkalmából.

**Uráliak himnusza.\***

Írta: Bán Aladár.  
Megzenésítette: J. Jürgenson.

*A zord Urál kopár tövétől,  
évezredek sötét öléből  
népraj kelt útra egykoron  
át ismeretlen tájakon.  
Vésszel, viharral szembeszállva  
elszéledett a nagy világra,  
s észak, nyugat, kelet terén  
hont szerze néki hős-erény.*

**Uralilaisten hymni.**

Finnre fordította: O. Manninen  
egyet. tanár, a Petőfi Társ. kültagja.

*Uralin kaltahilta karun,  
hämystä aikain alkutarun,  
sielt' ihmisparvi maailmaan  
läks ammoin outoon, avaraan.  
Se vaaran, myrskyn, taiston teille  
hajaantui maille, mantereille,  
loi länteen, itään, pohjolaan,  
sen uljuus uuden kotimaan.*

\* Az összes ural-altáji (azaz turáni) népek ünnepein az első sor így hangzik:  
Az Altáji s Urál tövétől... s ekkor a vers címe: *Turáni himnusz*.

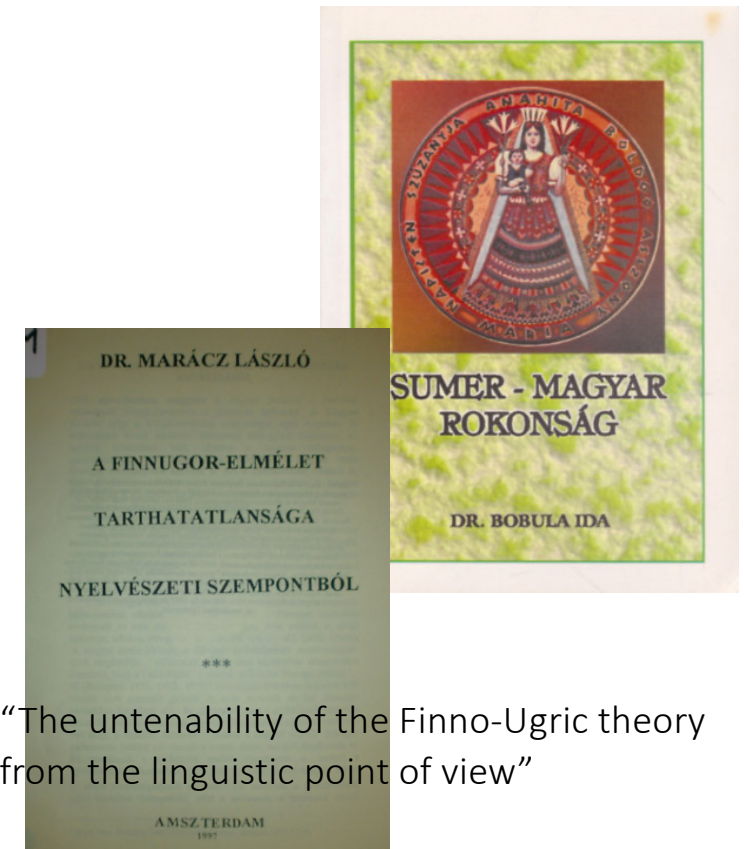
Poems celebrating the 5th Finno-Ugric Cultural Congress (1936), published in the journal *Turán* in 1937. The “Anthem of the Uralians” had an alternative version (“The Turanian Anthem”) used by Hungarian Turanists, with the first line mentioning not only the Ural but also the Altay mountains.

“From the rugged foothills of the barren Urals, / from the dark embrace of millennia / once a swarm of people took to the road / across unknown regions. / Facing dangers and storms / they spread out to the wide world, / and in the north, the west, the east / acquired homelands with their heroic virtue. (...)”



# Exile and anti-Communism: the myth of Our Banned Past

- After WW II and 1956, some Hungarian exile intellectuals turn to pseudolinguistics and conspiracy theories
  - Ida Bobula (1900–1981), historian exiled in America, publishes highly influential books about the Sumerian origin of Hungarian
  - László Marác (b. 1960 in the Netherlands), a generative syntactician turned language policy researcher, spreading alternative ideas about the structure of Hungarian (“root theory”) and conspiracy theories about Finno-Ugric studies as a creation of Habsburg agents and Communists



“The untenability of the Finno-Ugric theory from the linguistic point of view”

...“the history of historical language classification is actually an interface between politics and taxonomic manipulation of languages”...

(László Marác's official homepage,

<https://www.uva.nl/en/profile/m/a/l.k.maracz/l.k.maracz.html> )

# Political populism rediscovering nationalist (language) myths

- Extreme right-wing parties (MIÉP, Jobbik) embrace anti-Finno-Ugrism, the conspiracy theories of Finno-Ugristics as “Bolshevism”, and alternative origin stories (“our Hun-Scythian-Avar ancestry”)
- Increasing interest in national language (planning) among political leaders from the 1990s on, conflating fear of extinction with concerns for language correctness (Kontra & Cseresnyési 2011)
  - founding of the Language Strategy Institute in 2014, in 2019 merged into the new Institute of Hungarian Research (*Magyarságkutató Intézet*). The mission of the IHR is “to conduct research into the past, language and origin of the Hungarian people, which has not been possible until now”.
- Since 2018, Hungary is an “observer” in the Organization of Turkic States; PM Orbán speaks about the “relatedness” of Hungarian with Turkic

**Mi Magyarországon élünk,  
magyarok vagyunk, magyarul beszélünk,  
ez egy egyedülálló és különös nyelv,  
amely a türk nyelvekkel áll rokonságban.**

**'We live in Hungary, we are Hungarians, we speak Hungarian, it is a unique and peculiar language which is related to the Turkic languages.'** (Viktor Orbán in Kyrgyzstan, August 2018)

**Colour codes: Finno-Ugric, Iranic, Slavic, Turkic.**

<https://sentrooppasantra.wordpress.com/muilla-kielilla/oops-it-went-viral/>

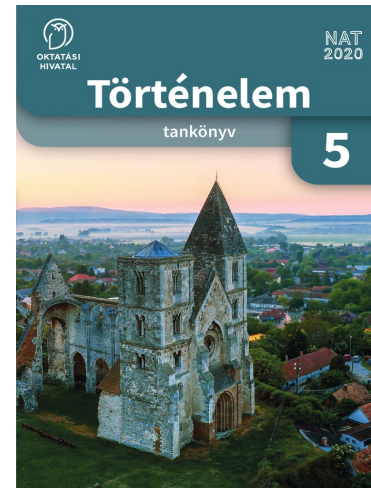
### A mondai hagyomány és a nyelvi hasonlóságok – ellentét vagy nem ellentét?

Az ősi magyar mondák szerint a **magyarok a hunoktól származnak**, vagy legalábbis rokonságban állnak a hunokkal. Idegen írók más sztyeppei népekkel is rokonították eleinket, így például az onogurokkal, avarokkal, türkökkel. A nyelvészek viszont a magyar nyelvet a finnugor nyelvcsaládba sorolták, és azt állították, hogy az Urál hegység vidékén élt egy ősnép, amelyik a finnugor ősnyelvet beszélte. Ilyen ősnép azonban nem létezett ott északon, vagyis nem volt ilyen ősnyelv sem. A magyar és az Urál-vidéki nyelvek hasonlósága úgy alakulhatott ki, hogy a magyar nyelv egykoron közvetítő nyelv lehetett azoknál a népeknél, akik később az Urál vidékére költöztek fel. Így oldható fel a történeti hagyomány és a nyelvi megfigyelések közötti ellentét. [2]

### Traditional lore and linguistic similarities – a controversy or not?

According to ancient Hungarian lore, **the Hungarians descend from the Huns**, or, at least, are related to them. Foreign authors have also considered our ancestors related with other steppe peoples, such as the Onogurs, Avars, or Turks. Linguists, in turn, have classified the Hungarian language into the Finno-Ugric language family and claimed that in the region of the Ural mountains [sic] there lived an ancient people which spoke the Finno-Ugric protolanguage. Such a proto-people, however, never existed in the north [?], so there could not be such a proto-language either [sic]. The similarity between Hungarian and the languages of the Ural region may have arisen in the following way: Hungarian was once an intermediary language between those peoples which later moved to the Ural region [!]. In this way, the controversy between historical tradition and linguistic observations [sic] can be solved.

School textbook:  
history for 5th-graders  
(Gróf & Szabados  
2020)





<https://kmmi.org.ua/cikkek/hirek/november-13-a-magyar-nyelv-napja>

*November 13.*

*A magyar nyelv napja*

**„Semmink sincs - csak múltunk van,  
és múltunkban gyönyörűen zengő nyelvünk.”**

**- Krúdy Gyula -**

## 4. Beyond Hungarian – for further discussion?

“We have nothing – we only have our past,  
and in our past the lovely sound of our  
language.”

Gyula Krúdy (1878–1933)

# Typical of Eastern (Central) Europe?

- “normative isomorphism of language, nation, and state” as a Central European feature (Kamusella 2017)
- loss of collective self-esteem, traumatic national history: “national frustration and fear of losing control is more typical of Eastern Europe”; national conspiracy theories help Hungarians feel, paradoxically, *both* special and unique *and* connected to a vast group of people (Krekó 2018: 155–156)
- Lack of “national” middle class, surviving distorted “gentry” values (identity based on the merits and achievements of one’s ancestors) – crisis of national identity? (Róna-Tas 2018)

# Non-linguists' understanding of language history

- Laypeople may encounter ancient language forms only in normalized or translated editions and fail to grasp the extent of language change (Nádasdy 2010)
- Historical linguistics is misunderstood as a handmaid of national history-writing (and nationalist linguists themselves may have contributed to this myth)
  - “There is only one thing that has affected me deeply and powerfully, I can live only for that, everything else is subsidiary. I have decided to show the Finnish people that we have not been torn apart from the world and world history, but that we are related to at least one sixth of mankind. Grammars are not my principal aim, but without grammars this aim cannot be achieved.” (M. A. Castrén to J. V. Snellman 1844; translation quoted from Korhonen 1986: 66).

# Linguists going maverick – and politicians buying their services

- What makes an academic linguist hop in the clown car?
  - Instead of MICE (Money, Ideology, Compromise, Ego), it's rather IE?
- Why do politicians even need pseudo-ancient languages? And what does it tell about the society at issue, in terms of
  - education and language education;
  - language planning;
  - its ability to deal with diversity and complexity of identities?



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