
The Current Situation of English Studies in Hungary

György E. Szőnyi (University of Szeged, Hungary)

The original version of this text was presented as the President's address at the 8th conference of the Hungarian Society for the Study of English (HUSSE), in Szeged, on 25 January 2007.¹

The genre of Presidential address had been newly introduced by the national board and was first delivered at the 8th biannual conference of the Hungarian association. Its purpose was to provide a good opportunity for the President to make an overall assessment of the current situation of Hungarian English Studies, acknowledging achievements and shortcomings, raising questions and provoking discussions for the sessions to come. It is a pleasure now for the author to be able to share these thoughts with the readers of *The European English Messenger* throughout Europe, also with the intention of offering parallels and contrasts with members of other national organizations. I am sure many of the problems or specialities of scholars of English outside Britain are similar and it would be valuable to be able to read reactions to and reflections on these aspects by other contributors to *The Messenger*.

1. What should the title suggest?

In my present understanding the “current situation” means the state and prospects of English Studies in the early 21st century. The structural logic of my address will follow first the outlining of the scope of English Studies as practised in Hungary; then reflecting on the state and role of English Studies in higher education; and, finally, discussing the tasks and prospects of English Studies research in Hungary.

1.1. The scope of ES as practised in Hungary

English Studies as a research field is in obviously close connection with the presence and role of English in our country. How does English appear in Hungary? It may perhaps be claimed that is now seen primarily as a foreign language, although not simply as the language of a foreign country, but increasingly – to quote Prof. Petworth from Malcolm Bradbury's *Rates of Exchange* – as “a means of international communication”. English also strongly features in Hungary (just as elsewhere) as a foreign culture (literature, film, music, pop). Last, but not least, it also offers a specific context and linguistic medium for various scientific, industrial, business issues; as a historical or present-day example

encompassing social awareness, patterns of democracy, multiculturalism, post-capitalist society, postcolonial consciousness, etc.

One should also stress the growing awareness of the geographical diversity of English. While some time ago English only meant British or American, by today even average Hungarians associate it with countries including Canada, South Africa, and Australia. Furthermore, English appears in Hungary in the context of teaching, research and service. By the latter I mean cultural communication, international relations, tourism and similar activities. All of these aspects and issues can and should be examined within English studies with an academic ambition, depending of course on the resources as well as the specific points of interests of the researchers.

1.2. The state and role of English Studies in higher education

I have at least two good reasons to place particular emphasis on this aspect in my review:

(1) We are in the middle of a very serious restructuring of the Hungarian higher education programs: this is the shift from a unified shorter college or a longer university curriculum into the Bologna-type 3+2 year long system of combining BA and MA degrees.

(2) During the thirty years of my career as a university lecturer in English literature and culture I have lived through all the challenges and changes of English Studies that have swept through the English-speaking world and also made a sudden impact on our universities. As the latter aspect is historical, let me reflect on it first.

Since the time of my student years in the 1970s the contents and structure of English Studies have changed dramatically, together with the theories related to and discussed in our profession. As for the structure, we have moved from English as *modern philology* to ES as an interdisciplinary complex of philosophy, cultural studies, politics, gender studies, a variety of linguistics, pragmatics, EFL/ESL, translations studies – all encompassing the breathtakingly wide geographical span and diversity already mentioned above.

Let me add here a short reminder and explanation for the younger generation of scholars of the way in which modern philology was defined and practice thirty years ago. Developed on the intellectual basis of classical philology – the heritage of 15th- and 16th-century humanists – by the 17th-century scholars discovered an increasing number of texts, documents, linguistic records and literary works relating to what is termed the “modern” rather than the classical (ancient Greek, Latin, or Hebrew) European languages. The methods of studying these texts were similar to those that humanists had always used for the study of the classical heritage: learning the language of these texts (old English, old French, old church Slavic, etc.), explaining their grammar, translating them into commonly used languages, interpreting them, and establishing their historical contexts. The ideological role of these studies was closely connected with the heyday of European nationalism, the romantic search for national identity and a past heritage. Few people realize, however, that the systematic university education of national languages and literatures appeared only in the 19th century (the first English department in the world was established at University College, London, in the 1830s)¹ and it was only from the beginning of the 20th century that university departments of non-classical and non-national languages and literatures became a standard in the humanities. This language- and literature-based curriculum dominated foreign language departments – such as English – until the 1980s. One consequence was that in the 1970s at the University of Szeged I mainly studied chronological literary history (from *Beowulf* to the early 20th century, since no more material could be squeezed into the five years of studies), history of the language, descriptive grammar, and the methodology of EFL.

This is now (fortunately) past all over the world, and I can proudly say that British studies, cultural studies, gender studies, postcolonial studies and all the other studies usually first promoted by the British Council were introduced at Central and Eastern European English Departments not much later than in England or in America. In the 1980s we were busy introducing new study areas in the English curriculum, such as history, cultural studies, art and music history, and with the changes in the political regimes in 1989 the door was opened for a theoretical revolution.

As students in the 1970 we were attracted to structuralism, and we tried to explain everything with the aid of Roman Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss.

This was almost an illegal, or at least very suspect, approach in contrast to the obligatory Marxist approaches. In addition, as a revolt against Marxism we jumped at hermeneutics and reader response theories, and then deconstructionism, in the late 1980s. Paradoxically, after the fall of Communism we returned to politics and rediscovered Marxism imported from the West with new historicism and cultural materialism in the 1990s, absorbed psychoanalytical approaches, gender studies and postcolonial awareness by 2000, and now we face ethics again, together with questions of “literature and law”, as we can see from our keynote speakers’ titles.²

In linguistics we have lived through descriptive grammar, Saussurian structuralism, Chomskyan generative linguistics, then the offensive staged by sociolinguistic and pragmatics, conversation analysis and systemics, which in turn by Hausholder was called *hocus-pocus* linguistics. In teaching methodologies we moved from language practice to *skills*, and we have integrated business English and testing methodology, just to mention a few of the many issues that have confronted us in less than the time-span of a full generation.

1.3. English Studies at the Advent of Bologna

But enough of this historical survey! The point is that today English Studies are infinitely more complex and more challenging than thirty years ago, and the tantalizing question is how to condense all this into a university curriculum which will be digestible for a much larger and less motivated body of students, and which at the same time represents up-to-date and renewable knowledge. Furthermore, our curriculum and the underlying knowledge have to be flexible enough for a greater variety of career prospects than the obligatory “teacher of English language and literature”, the “only begetter” of English Studies in the bad old days.

Well, the division of studies into the phases of the BA and MA seems to be a reasonable solution. The BA should provide the basics and should also offer some practical skills and orientations with which the less able students can leave the university and find satisfactory jobs. The MA can then be reserved for the smaller numbers of the select(ed) few who have more serious, even scholarly ambitions. And then, finally, the PhD programs should guide the most ambitious into rewarding academic careers. But is this really the case? We are now past the accreditation of the BA programs and are about to submit our MA visions to the Hungarian Accreditation Board. So it is high time to raise a

number of pertinent questions.

Are we really providing the practical skills at the BA level? Shall we manage to create real intellectual challenges at the future MA level? Have we found the best balance of contents? Are there really rewarding academic jobs waiting for young PhD graduates? Our problems now are similar to those of our colleagues in “the West”: shrinking opportunities in academia, the prospect of joblessness, and salaries that remain low for those who find academic posts. A special problem with the MA accreditation is that the maths of credit-crunching has been seriously misunderstood by the legislators: Parliament has passed a higher education law which assigns 120 credits to the MA programs (this is correct and conforms with the European standards), but at the same time requiring 1200 contact hours of teaching during the four semesters. An elementary calculation proves that with such proportions one course will be valued at 1-2 credits, which is actually fewer than at the BA level. What is more, students will have to sit all day in the classrooms rather than in the library doing their serious reading. It is too late to ponder on the origins of this colossal blunder, but we do have to acknowledge the result: there is a national game being played all over Hungary about we should pretend that consultations and other similar activities can be interpreted as contact hours. This at least constitutes an amusing test case for students of semantics and semiotics, who may, however, develop a strong grudge against those who have to put together the syllabuses and other accreditation material. We can only hope that the legislators have been wiser in other countries that are also entering the brave new world of the Bologna system.

The state of language teaching itself is equally problematic. In Hungary there are still too few people who speak good English, and this will require a lot of research in the field of EFL/ESL.

To sum up: English Studies, as an academically disciplined, research-oriented practice, should and does play an important role in supporting and stimulating the teaching of English at various levels and in various contexts, from language school classrooms to general state-funded primary and secondary education, not to mention English as a university degree program. At this point, therefore, I will turn to English Studies as a research activity in the humanities.

1.4. The tasks and prospects of English Studies research in Hungary

Research in English Studies outside the United

Kingdom has multiple tasks. There are internal, national obligations: to provide a solid scholarly background for higher education, to mediate and interpret the most recent results of British or other anglophone national academic research, and to foster the spread and popularization of English-based culture in the home country. Here the role of “criticism” – in the Central and Eastern European sense, that is, writing critiques – of translations, theatrical or film productions, participating in cultural debates, etc. plays a major role.

In consequence, academic English research should have some influence on the development of the humanities in the home country. English Studies – “anglisztika” – should be coherent, should have its own paradigm and development, producing results rateable as excellent, but it should also address issues that are relevant, on the one hand, for domestic scholarship but also, on the other, for the international English Studies community.

This latter aspect should direct our attention toward the international dimension of English Studies research, which again has two aspects. On the one hand, in Hungary we are facing the inevitably more extensive and resource-rich research carried out in Britain and the other anglophone countries, especially in the United States. On the other hand, we should evaluate ourselves and make a concerted effort to cooperate with countries where English Studies also form part of “modern philology,” and not as a national subject. In this respect the European Erasmus system has been very useful. Our departments have numerous Erasmus links with a great number of European universities, and within these networks not only are student exchanges carried out but, through faculty exchange, ideas are shared and cooperation is promoted.

Very important, too, is – or should be – cooperation with the cultural institutions of the English-speaking countries. The British Council has so far been instrumental in supporting English Studies in Hungary, and we can only hope that in an age of rationalization this support will not disappear in the immediate future.³ Cooperation with Ireland, Canada and the US does exist – with fluctuating intensity and financial investment, I think – but there is still much potential for developing links with Australia and other anglophone countries.

If one takes into consideration all of the above aspects, English Studies in Hungary appear to occupy a middle position: not too bright, but nothing to wail about either. In Hungary English Studies occupy a solid and often envied place in the

humanities. The profession, although relatively small, is well organized as is witnessed by the ever-growing HUSSE conferences.⁴ We also have sub-chapters, such as HUSDE (Hungarian Society for the Study of Drama in English) and HUSSI (Hungarian Society for the Study of Irish). We organize numerous national and international conferences and these conferences are of high quality. It should be noted, however, that the real driving-force of these conferences is often the PhD students, who feel obliged to participate in as many gatherings as they can, while the “big names” in Hungarian English Studies are often missing. Another problem is one that was highlighted long ago by Professor Antal Bókay: because most English Studies conferences in Hungary are held in English, members of our guild often segregate themselves from the mainstream of Hungarian academia, where discoveries are sometimes proclaimed loudly about trends in international scholarship that have long been taken for granted as commonplace amongst scholars of English.

If one looks at the statistics, we can be satisfied by the number of students at the many departments where English is taught as a university subject, Hungary is also well supplied with PhD programs in all areas of English and American Studies, and theoretical and applied linguistics. The number of PhDs defended is also good news, since these actions increasingly frequently involve foreign scholars as examiners, The number of dissertations published is also growing, sometimes under the auspices of international publishers such as Peter Lang or the Cambridge Scholars Press.

Unfortunately, the system of Hungarian academic advancement has also had its setbacks. In this country we need to go through a multi-step procedure before we can reach professorial status. This consists, in effect, of three dissertations: the PhD, the habilitation, and the “Doctor of the Hungarian Academy” dissertation (DSc). The result is that a scholar moves from dissertation to dissertation, and this consumes so much energy that there is no ambition left for real monographic publications. And if somebody is determined to write books, the question still remains: in what language to write? Should one try to compete on the international market with an English manuscript, or to associate more closely with Hungarian academia by means of books in Hungarian? Expectations and parameters are very different, and the same manuscript cannot be equally adequate for both audiences.

Despite all these problems, we can happily

acknowledge that some of our colleagues continue to contribute important work to Hungarian scholarship with their large-scale monographs, such as Péter Dávidházi’s recent study of the Hungarian reception of Shakespeare, György Székely’s on the English Renaissance, Tamás Bényei’s on the post-Second World War novel and István Rácz’s on post-Second World War English poetry. At the same time, I am also aware of Hungarian colleagues who have published monographs with Macmillan, Brepols, Rodopi, SUNY Press, and other English or American presses – these are very hopeful results but we still lack a Hungarian Jan Kott or Wolfgang Iser.

To return to the infrastructure of English Studies research in Hungary, thanks to the University of Debrecen we take pride in Szeged in having – to my knowledge – the only permanent and regularly printed journal in the Central and Eastern European area, the *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, which publishes widely acclaimed thematic issues with a renowned international authorship. Special mention should also be made to the *AnaChronist* (published at the ELTE University), which for many years has fulfilled the important mission of providing a high-quality peer-reviewed forum for PhD students and young scholars. And at my own university in Szeged, I can mention *Americana*, the first permanent and peer-reviewed e-journal devoted to Anglo-American studies in Hungary, which with its fifth issue has attracted significant international attention.⁵

Besides these, most English Departments have their occasional series of publications: the *Eger Journal of American Studies*, the Miskolc-based *Modern Filológiai Tanulmányok*, the *Papers in English and American Studies* (including a monograph series) in Szeged, etc. Having this relative abundance of opportunities to publish either in English or in Hungarian within the country, this comfortable situation may tend to make Hungarian researchers somewhat lazy. While many of us participate in international conferences and duly appear in conference volumes, Hungarian names appear only rarely in major international periodicals. This is a luxury that natural scientists could not afford, and we should make an effort to change the situation.

2. The future

In the context of the future, English Studies appear to be well established in Hungary. It is possibly the most vivid, and definitely the largest and busiest, area of modern philology in the country, with vital and manifold international ties. It functions well as a

mediator between Hungarian national scholarship (literary and cultural studies, linguistics, foreign language teaching methodology, various new theories, gender studies, etc.) and the international community of English Studies. Nevertheless, it is desirable that the visibility of Hungarian scholars in this field should become more significantly enhanced, both domestically and abroad.

It continues to be a high priority that English Studies research should reinforce Hungarian higher education and help to work out and improve the new Bologna type of university curricula. An especially sensitive area is the training of English teachers. Considering the rather chaotic state of the restructuring of teacher training in Hungary, we have to be alert and do our best to exercise some control over the hasty projects of politicians.

We need to continue our active cooperation with the European Society for the Study of English. Member associations and individual members are our “closest relatives” and allies in our trade. Unfortunately, the usual cost of participation doesn’t make it easy for Hungarians to be present at the

ESSE conferences. We are already an EU member, that is, “grown up citizens” of the Continent, and yet, as such, we have already been deprived – I would say justly – of most of the assistance and support that we enjoyed before accession to the EU. It remains a fact, however, that the average monthly university salary more or less equals the cost of participation in an ESSE conference. We can only hope that this will eventually change and also that ESSE events will be carefully organized taking the realities of Europe, both east and west, into consideration. Until then we – together with other Eastern European colleagues – will continue to rely on the Type B ESSE bursaries, and our PhD students will continue to apply for registration fee waivers at the ESSE conferences.

And finally, since this is a revised version of my original conference address, I would like to take this opportunity to send greetings from Hungary through *The European English Messenger* to all of our European colleagues. We look forward to establishing with you ever stronger and meaningful ties and cooperation.

NOTES

1. Before the Presidential Address proper, the leader of HUSSE greeted the distinguished guests of the conference, among others the following foreign keynote speakers: Prof. *Susana Onega* from the English Department of the University of Zaragoza, former President of the Spanish Association; Prof. *Rüdiger Ahrens*, CBE, Professor Emeritus of the University of Würzburg, former President of the German Association, editor of significant periodicals, such as *Symbolism*; Prof. *Martin Kayman*, one of the founding fathers of ESSE, director of the English Institute of the University of Cardiff; editor in charge of the *European Journal for English Studies*; and Prof. Donald Wesling from the University of San Diego, California, who was just starting his guest professorship at the University of Debrecen. Two keynote speakers were invited from among Hungarian scholars of English Studies, Prof. Péter Dávidházi, a Shakespearean and Prof. István Kenesei, theoretical linguist, both recipients of the prestigious Ország Prize (see the article on László Ország, by Lehel Vadon).
2. See the ESSE project, *The European History of English Studies* (the first volume published in 2006 and the second volume in preparation) and the various national reviews that it includes.
3. Rüdiger Ahrens addressed “*Equity as Ethical Principle in Colonial and Post-colonial Literatures: the Case of Joseph Conrad and E. M. Forster*”, Martin Kayman spoke on “*The Body of Law, the Literary Corpus, and the Return of the Real*” and Susana Onega discussed the question of “*The Negotiation of Trauma in Contemporary British Fiction*”.
4. Since I delivered this address in January 2007, the British Council in Hungary has reduced its staff to a fifth of its former size and has practically ceased all culture-promotional activities in our country – just as happened a few years ago in Western Europe. French and Italian colleagues are still bitterly complaining about that withdrawal.
5. At the last HUSSE conference 176 papers were presented (the current number of registered HUSSE members was then 178) and over 220 participants from a number of countries.
6. See <<http://americanajournal.hu/>>.