

Theses of doctoral (Ph.D.) dissertation

**Zsolt Szebelédi**

The linguistic analysis of György Szerémi's Epistola

consultant: Dr. Gyula Mayer

Pázmány Péter Catholic University  
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences  
PhD School for Linguistics  
Workshop of Classical Philology  
Budapest  
2017

## I. Historical Background, Posing the Problem

The latin work *Epistola de perditione regni Hungarorum* by György Szerémi survived the centuries in only one copy to our knowledge so far. It became known for Hungarian researchers relatively late only in 1840 when Antal Gévay published extracts from the text kept in the Archives of Vienna that time. The first and last to this day edition of this work was published in 1857, containing unfortunately numerous misprints. Historians began to work with the new source as soon as it was published. They thoroughly analysed the content of Szerémi's work, evaluated the historical authenticity, and pointed out a number of factual errors. However, they did not pay much attention to the language analysis of it. Taking only the use of language of the *Epistola* into consideration I can mention only three researchers working with the topic at greater or lesser extent: the editor of the text Gusztáv Wenzel, László Erdélyi and Lajos Szádeczky. In his foreword Gusztáv Wenzel disserts about the specific language use of the work. He highlighted a number of specific latin phrases and Hungarian words from the text, and states that Szerémi's language is a kind of „vulgar latin” which is far from the classical latin grammar and style, but very near to the Hungarian way of thinking. In his opinion *Epistola* can be best understood by native Hungarian readers.

The most thorough language analysis so far appeared 25 years after the first edition by László Erdélyi, who discussed the language analysis of the work in a separate chapter. Erdélyi examined the language of the work from different point of views. He wrote about orthography, the Hungarian and Serbian words used in the Latin text, the Hungarian-like syntax and specific terminology. No matter how thorough Erdélyi was, a major deficiency of his writing is, that he used the edited version of *Epistola* and not the manuscript of it, and he did not check up on the mistakes he found inspecting whether they appear in the text or are only misprints. Erdélyi must have felt it, as he emphasized in the foreword

that his statements are relevant only if the published text agrees with the manuscript.

In the same year as Erdélyi's book was published, Lajos Szádeczky wrote an article calling attention to the misprints of the Wenzel edition. Szádeczky listed the kinds of mistakes in the publication in a carefully organized way. First, he listed the general mistakes like abbreviations reconstructed improperly and inconsistently, then he collected omissions, those text places which were simply left out from the text by the publisher without indicating it. Szádeczky collected many of the specific – not used in classical Latin – phrases and Serbian, Hungarian and Turkish expressions of the *Epistola*. All three authors came to the same conclusion, namely that Szerémi's language is a kind of rough, everyday Latin which cannot be compared with the demanding classical Latin humanists used that time. This statement is by and large correct, nevertheless they were not prepared to take a deep examination of the specific language use on and to compare it to the different levels of Latin language used that time. It is even a bigger problem, that researchers were satisfied with merely taking over the above findings. I intended to overcome this shortcoming, moreover, I wanted to answer some more questions in connection with the language use of the manuscript which have not been answered so far.

## **II. Methodology Followed**

I divided my theses into three major parts. After overviewing the literature and the scientific findings in this topic so far I thoroughly examined the language of the manuscript in the first part of my theses answering two questions which have not been satisfactorily settled yet. The first is whether the only manuscript of the *Epistola* is an autograph or a contemporary copy of it and the second is if the work *Epistola flebilis* found at the end of the codex is Szerémi's own

production or somebody else's work.

In the second part I studied the orthography, word formation, morphology and syntax of *Epistola* with the help of linguistic guides and dictionaries of middle Latin. I compared Szerémi's work to the late antique vulgar Latin and the European middle Latin in the wider context, and to the scholastic Latin used in Hungary in 13–16th centuries in the narrow sense. Although the basis of my comparison was not humanist Latin I alluded to it many times during my research. I went deeply into explaining the specific and vulgar words and phrases of the *Epistola* and interpreting Hungarian words and sentences appearing in the text. During my work I primarily relied on linguistic and Latin lexicons. The sample of the glossary was the *Lexicon medii aevii Hungariae* with minor changes.

### **III. New Findings**

Though I corrected many smaller mistakes during my research, my foremost findings are the following:

1. Researchers working with *Epistola* have pointed out many copy errors in the text which are errors only from the humanist Latin language use's point of view and are only orthographic features of the Middle Ages. Besides, there are a number of errors in the text indicating that the work is a contemporary copy of the manuscript and not an autograph. The text can be found in National Széchényi Library its shelfmark is *Fol. Lat. 4020*.

2. It can be definitely stated based on analysing content and linguistic and stylistic features that both *Epistola* and *Epistola flebilis* – found in the end of the manuscript – is Szerémi György's own work. Moreover, it is also clear that the language of *Epistola flebilis* is so similar to *Epistola* that we can reject Gusztáv Wenzel's subject if *Epistola flebilis* is a translation of a Hungarian

letter into Latin.

3. Although some researchers associated Szerémi's work with humanism, I can clearly state on the basis of my findings that neither contemporary humanist idealism, nor its language aesthetic principles had an effect on Szerémi's language use. The work cannot be considered as even a weaker humanist product either from the content or from a linguistic point of view.

4. I came to the conclusion that Szerémi's work is an outstanding source of the „vulgar” Latin used in the Middle Ages and in the Early New Ages in speaking. This „vulgar” latin is connected many ways to middle Latin taught in schools that time and terminologically not to be confused with vulgar Latin used in the Old Ages. It is not about that the language of the *Epistola* perfectly reflects on the Latin language spoken at that time – as it survived the centuries in a written form – but there are so many language features in the work indicating that it can be considered as a text heavily influenced by vulgar elements.

5. After I compared the language of the *Epistola* with the contemporary language standards (humanist, chancellery, monastic and official scribe Latinity) it became clear to me even if from a linguistic point of view the text shows kinship with monastic and official scribe Latinity, all in all we must regard the text as an independent level of language use. Although Szerémi's and the scribes' composing diplomas literacy and language skills must have been rather similar, scribes used a clear middle Latin vocabulary rich in fixed terms and the *Epistola* has an informal language. In our sources we can sporadically find language use like Szerémi's especially in places where scribes did not use the official language but wrote about their thoughts in an unbound way.

6. In addition, I revealed the majority of the origin of the vulgar phrases (e.g. *costum*, *grobat*, *kola* etc.) and I also attempted to explain certain unique word forms (*allare*, *castor*, *kanchia* > *akanchia* etc.). I acted with Hungarian

phrases and idioms appearing in the text (e.g. *zemet, totoknak vadalma figei* etc.) the same way. I enclosed the results of my findings in a Latin glossary as an Appendix.

#### **IV. Publications appeared in connection with the topic**

SZEBELEDI Zsolt, *Juhász László Szerémi-fordításának kézirati kérdései*, Magyar Könyvszemle 128/2(2012) 256–262.

SZEBELEDI Zsolt, *A zemet szó jelentése Szerémi György latin nyelvű művében*, Magyar Nyelv 108(2012) 470–473.

SZEBELEDI Zsolt, *Csorba Dávid: Mohács - egy mesemondó szemével: Emlékezeti rétegek Szerémi György Epistolájában*, Magyar Könyvszemle 29(2013) 121–122.

SZEBELEDI Zsolt, *György Szerémi, Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History: Volume 7. Central and Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa and South America (1500–1600)*, eds. David THOMAS, John AZUMAH, Douglas PRATT, Andrew NEWMAN, Stanisław GRODŹ, John CHESWORTH, Leiden, Brill Academic Publishers, 2015, 260–269.

SZEBELEDI Zsolt, *Egy közmondás lehetséges forrása Szerémi György Epistolájában: Humanista történetírás és neolatin irodalom a 15–18. századi Magyarországon*, szerk. BÉKÉS Enikő, KASZA Péter, LENGYEL Réka, Budapest, MTA BTK Irodalomtudományi Intézet, 2015, 84–90