

The role of István Szerdahelyi in interlinguistics

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Interlinguistics – a young and often misunderstood branch of applied linguistics – began with Jespersen (who was the first to use the term in 1931), and have some outstanding figures in its history. One of these is doubtless István Szerdahelyi. He initiated the university teaching of interlinguistics and esperantology at Eötvös University (Budapest, HU), developed the curriculum of the specialty, created the study materials, published papers and books, and therefore gained acceptance for scientific research on these topics (Koutny 2010).

For him, interlinguistics dealing with international communication and planned languages (see Blanke 1985, Barandovská-Frank 2018, 2020, Gobbo 2020) was a field of applied linguistics, in the framework of language planning and politics which was new at that time (see his university coursebook on interlinguistics in 1980, for LPP Gazzola et al. 2023), furthermore he contributed by the presentation of planned languages by Hungarian authors.

The teaching focus at the university was placed on the linguistic aspects of Esperanto, the most widespread planned language, therefore Szerdahelyi researched the grammatical, especially the morphological structure of Esperanto, and brought new insight to it (Szerdahelyi 1975, later Jansen 2013). He began the semantic analysis of Esperanto which had previously been completely neglected (Szerdahelyi 1976). He discovered etymology for the young language Esperanto, in which practically the whole vocabulary comes from other languages, he analyzed the process of borrowing by Zamenhof from Romance and Germanic languages, and identified the influence of Slavic languages (Szerdahelyi 1987).

He was also involved in lexicographic work (see Hungarian–Esperanto Dictionary with about 65 000 lexical items) in collaboration with many specialists. Esperanto as a first foreign language is said to facilitate the learning of other (especially Romance) languages. Szerdahelyi carried out a 5-country experiment in order to investigate this question in the 1970s (Szerdahelyi 1976, Sonnabend 1979, Madella 2023).

The 100th anniversary of his birth is an excellent occasion to examine the scope and significance of his work, so that his key place in interlinguistics can be recognized.

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