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**Internet language as a mediolect in the light of Hungarian
and international sociolinguistic literature**

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: the study places the internet language within the typology of language varieties, synthesizing and further developing the sometimes mutually contradictory views of Hungarian and international sociolinguistics and internet linguistics. Using a theoretical-analytical method (comparative analysis of conceptual models known from sociolinguistics), the study demonstrates that the internet language as a language variant can be classified as a mediolect among written language registers.

Objective: to resolve a paradox that has existed in internet linguistics for decades. It seeks to answer the question: What (what kind of lect) is being examined when we examine internet language?

Research materials: the paper builds on the results of an earlier study of authors: it accepts the existence of internet language in order to attempt to define its nature. In an effort to overcome this paradox of internet linguistics, it takes as its basis models of language variation and concepts of internet linguistics drawn from Hungarian, German and English literature and develops them further.

Results and novelty of the research: the main result of the research is that internet language has been successfully placed within the system of language varieties: it has been established that internet language can be classified as a mediolect among written language registers. The scientific novelty of the research lies in the fact that the placement of internet language within the system of language varieties was achieved by synthesizing conflicting approaches of the internet linguistics.

Key words: sociolinguistics, internet language, language varieties, register, mediolect

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**Интернет-язык как медиолект в свете венгерской
и международной социолингвистической литературы**

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АННОТАЦИЯ

Введение. Исследование относит интернет-язык к типологии языковых разновидностей, обобщая и развивая подчас противоречивые друг другу взгляды венгерской и международной социолингвистики и интернет-лингвистики. Данная работа доказывает, что сетевой язык как языковая разновидность может быть отнесён к медиолектам в рамках письменного языка.

Цель: разрешить парадокс, существующий в интернет-лингвистике на протяжении десятилетий.

Материалы исследования: в качестве основы берутся модели языковой вариативности и концепции интернет-лингвистики, взятые из венгерской, немецкой и английской литературы.

Результаты и научная новизна. Основным результатом исследования является успешное включение интернет-языка в систему языковых разновидностей: установлено, что интернет-язык можно классифицировать как медиолект среди регистров письменного языка.

Научная новизна исследования заключается в том, что включение интернет-языка в систему языковых разновидностей было достигнуто путём синтеза противоречивых подходов интернет-лингвистики.

Ключевые слова: социолингвистика, интернет-язык, языковые разновидности, регистр, медиолект

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Introduction

Although many linguists doubt the existence of internet language (e. g., [6; 28; 29]), a recently published study validates the term based on various sociolinguistic considerations: „Even though two of the six aspects presented in the paper (the principles of uniformity and novelty) argue against the existence of internet language, the four remaining (quantity, community, analogy and illusorycum) guarantee its legitimacy” [14, 180]: 1. principle of quantity: internet language possesses a higher probability of containing features deemed specific to internet language – even if they are not originally so (the principle of novelty as a counterargument: [6; 31]) – (e. g., emojis, acronyms, typos) than any other language variety; 2. principle of community: according to the majority of internet users participating in internet language surveys [3; 13], the internet language is real, even if objectively it is not entirely uniform (the principle of uniformity as a counterargument: [6, 5–6; 7, 72–73]); 3. principle of analogy: if strict criteria were not applied when judging the legitimacy of other language varieties (e. g., dialects) [cf. 16], – for the sake of consistency – we must not do so during the validation of internet language either; 4. illusorycum-principle: similarly to other linguistic terms (e. g. language and language varieties, [cf. 23], internet language can be viewed as an illusorycum: it is a phenomenon that is elusive, non-uniform and difficult to delimit, yet nonetheless

necessary, since without it academic discourse concerning our object of study would be impossible or exceedingly cumbersome.

Therefore, having accepted the existence of internet language (i.e., having validated the term), and proceeding along the line of argument commenced by the cited study [14], we consider it expedient to determine what kind of language variety is in question (for a similar approach on a different path, cf. [4]).

Materials and methods

A key paradox of internet linguistics is that it studies internet language without a clear understanding of its true nature [cf. 31]. The placement of internet language within the typology of language varieties has been an unresolved issue in both the Hungarian and the international literature for decades. In our study, we attempt to overcome this paradox by synthesizing and further developing established sociolinguistic models of language variation [9; 10; 22; 24; 25] alongside the occasionally conflicting approaches in Hungarian, German and English internet linguistics (e.g., [18; 27; 35]). The research material consists of a critical review of some of the more important language variety models [cf. 9, 10, 22, 24, 26] and internet linguistic traditions [cf. 5, 6, 29, 31, 35] of the mentioned languages: “The Hungarian literature and example material is relevant because, alongside its English and German counterparts, Hungarian

internet linguistics is among the oldest and has one of the richest histories” [14, 180].

In our qualitative research, we use a theoretical-analytical method based on the comparative analysis of conceptual models known from sociolinguistics.

Results

Internet language as a language variety?

The classification of internet language among language varieties is no simple task. Its complexity is highlighted by Tamás Péter Szabó's pointed critique of Ágnes Veszelszki's digilect concept (which is in the present work considered synonymous with internet language) titled *Hatásvadász nyelvészet* [Claptrap linguistics]: “Any investigation is made somewhat more difficult if we do not know what it is that we are investigating,” [31, translated by the authors] we can phrase Szabó's objection against the fact that theses of Veszelszki's PhD dissertation [34] do not clearly specify what kind of language variety is actually referred to by digilect.

We agree with Szabó that although Veszelszki does raise the possibility of a sociolect, a mediolect and a functional style, she ultimately fails to take a stance in favor of any of them: “due to the novel nature of this language variety and its continuous transformation and lack of formation, we do not yet place it in the typology for the time being; we do, however, acknowledge its emergence and document its effects” [34, 7, translated by the authors]. The complexity of the problem is further demonstrated by the fact that most digital communication researchers do not even undertake the task of placing the internet language they study, however it may be termed (e.g., *netspeak* [5], *digital language* [2, 72], *e-language* [1, 30–33]), within the typology of language varieties. Veszelszki's merit, therefore, lies in the fact that she enumerates the potential solutions (even though she fails to take a clear stance in favor of any of them).

From potentialities to the solution

In the following part of the paper, we review Veszelszki's views on the classification of digilect [35, 38–41] as presented in her monograph *Netnyelvészet* [Internet Linguistics], a text considered seminal in the Hungarian academic sphere, adding our own observations.

The first approach proposed by Veszelszki suggests that, as a sociolect, digilect is a language variety associated with a particular social group: in a narrower sense, it can be linked to younger people,

and in a broader sense, to computer users (more precisely, internet users – authors' note). Veszelszki holds both interpretations to be problematic: the former because it is no longer only the youth who use computers (or the Internet), and the latter because the sheer number of users would render the category too broad (essentially redundant – note by the authors). It should also be noted that, in the first decades of the Internet's emergence, there would have been grounds for treating digilect as a sociolect (the language of computer (internet) users), as only a narrow group had the appropriate digital infrastructure. Naturally, this specific question concerned few researchers at that time.

The second approach proposed by Veszelszki suggests that, as a mediolect, digilect is a language variety distinguishable based on medium: it is associated with the computer, one of the channels (media) of communication. Veszelszki observes: “Most language users employ digilect features when typing on a computer” [35, 38, translated by the authors]. We can agree with the author, for it is the digital medium that has brought about, among other things, digital encoding (letters are more easily discernible and readable than traditional handwriting), the preference for lowercase writing for the reason of it requiring less effort (avoiding the need to press Shift), the active use of emojis (which are often pre-integrated even into the toolsets of formal genres like email) and the frequent use of abbreviation techniques (consider, for instance, when our phone beeps between two tasks and we hastily write a reply to our friend).

To Veszelszki's second proposition we would like to add only two interrelated ideas: (1) internet language features are also evident in texts composed on smartphones and tablets, so it is more appropriate to consider not only the computer but digital devices in general as the communication medium (we cannot stop there, however); (2) while we agree that the nature of digilect is fundamentally determined by the digital devices – think, for example, of typos resulting from the proximity of keys on a keyboard –; without the Internet, which guarantees inter-device communication, today, we could not talk about an internet language. Internet language is therefore a mediolect that is simultaneously connected to both the device and the Internet. Following this line of argument, the designation *digilect* can be construed as a broader category in comparison to the technical term *internet language*, as the former can also encompass digital texts created without an internet

connection, such as texts that are often carefully stylized and prepared for printing or uploading (e.g., Word, Notepad, FocusWriter), thereby extending beyond Veszelszki's original intention. Digilect is therefore a concept that can be used not only in an internet language sense, but also in a "machine language" sense (which is why we prefer the term *internet language* to *digilect*).

Although Veszelszki notes in several places that the digilect influences other, non-digital media – such as informal spoken conversation (e.g., Hungarian pronunciation [lol] 'laughing out loud', [ikszdÉ] 'smiley face with open mouth and closed eyes' [óemgÉ] 'oh my God'), advertising language (e.g., the use of emoticons, emojis, peculiar abbreviations [19; 20]), students' handwritten notes (e.g., 3szög 'triangle'; 3x 'three times'; fizika < 3 'I love physics'), etc. [35, 11, 220, 227, 230, 254] –, we do not believe that the presence of frequently spectacular and expressive borrowed elements would result in the blurring of medial boundaries: we thus still have no reason to reject the internet language as a mediolect analogy; we do not consider this category to be broad. It is a cliché in linguistics (especially in sociolinguistics), but nevertheless important to emphasize for the purposes of demonstration, that there is no living language in the world that does not contain elements derived from other languages; and the same statement also applies to language varieties (lects) [cf. 21, 14]: there are no "pure" language varieties in the strictest sense of the word, therefore the diffusion of elements of internet language as a mediolect into other language varieties is a natural linguistic process (with the reverse also being true).

Since the idea of the mediolect as a type of language variety is absent from traditional Hungarian language variety typologies (e.g., [17; 30]) or typologies available in Hungarian (e.g., [33; 36]), Veszelszki [35, 36–41] goes back to Heinrich Löffler's 1985 sociolinguistic work published in German. Löffler's [26, 87] seven-pillar model of language variation includes the following lects: (1) dialects (regional varieties), (2) sociolects (social varieties), (3) age- and gender-specific language varieties (gerontolects and sexolects), (4) functionolects (cf. functional styles), (5) varieties categorized by situations, styles, and text types, (6) mediolects, (7) idiolects (language varieties of individuals). Veszelszki [35, 40] positions digilect between the two mediolects distinguished by Löffler [26, 91, 98]: between written and spoken language. This approach virtually invites the placement of

Zoltán Bódi's [3, 32–56] potentially synonymous term, written spoken language, on the newly created scale (suggesting that the text genres of internet language may exhibit the features of both written and spoken language): written language (e.g., traditional, handwritten letters) – written spoken language (e.g., comments) – spoken language (e.g., face-to-face conversations).

Mediolect as an umbrella term fits well into Michael Halliday's model of language variation [9, 87], [10, 35], which differentiates between two principal categories: dialects and registers (for a Hungarian adaptation of this, cf. [22; 24; 25]). The former denote user-based language varieties, while the latter refer to use-based ones. Lanstyák, who adapts Halliday's conceptual pair, identifies the fundamental difference between the two types in stable versus (rapidly) changing features: "dialects denote relatively constant characteristics of speakers, such as their geographical origin, social status, ethnic background, sex, etc., whereas registers signify the specific activity they are engaged in at that moment" [22, 2, translated by the authors].

Level 1: *Internet language as a REGISTER*

In Lanstyák's model of language variation, which adapts Halliday's conceptual pair (and retains sociolinguistic considerations), internet language could be included at the first level among the registers since its use is linked to the speech situation: when not using the Internet, the use of its formulae is uncommon; conversely, the chance of this is greater. The idea of treating the internet language, or more precisely *Interactive Written Discourse* (e.g., chatting), as a register is not novel, having emerged as early as the beginning of the 1990s [cf. 8].

Level 2: *Internet language as a MEDIOLECT classified as a register*

Lanstyák [22; 24] distinguishes the following register types: (1) stylistic varieties (e.g., formal–informal style texts), (2) mediolects (written and spoken language), (3) languages for specific purposes (e.g., the language of scientific disciplines, professions or hobbies), and (4) group-specific varieties (e.g., baby talk, foreigner talk). At this (second) level, internet language can be placed among the mediolects, since the Internet can be regarded as a communication medium (channel). This concerns not writing in the traditional sense but digital writing [cf. 7].

Level 3: *Internet language as a mediolect classified as a WRITTEN LANGUAGE register*

At the deepest level, in contrast to Veszelszki [35, 40], we do not position internet language between

written and spoken language as a kind of intermediate (hybrid) element, thereby avoiding the “written spoken language” [3] critique (cf. [7, 61; 27, 153–154]), but rather classify it among the written language registers because it is mediated by visual signs irrespective of the factor of linguistic elaboration (e.g., the spoken language features characteristic of chatting).

The solution we propose is in line with the model of Peter Koch and Wulf Oesterreicher [18] further developed by Christa Dürscheid [6], who dismisses internet language and similar terms: the authors distinguish between medial and conceptual orality and literacy. The medial (medium-based) dimension pertains to the realization form (phonic or graphic) of the linguistic utterance, whereas the conceptual plane denotes its mode of expression (modality) (written or spoken language). While the distinction in the former is dichotomous (sharply separated), in the latter it is continuum-like (the utterance is closer to one pole or the other). The genres of internet language are medially literate (digitally encoded) – thus, at this level, we cannot establish a transitional category proposed by Veszelszki [35, 40] (there is no such thing as “written spoken language” – [3]) – the variation manifests itself on the conceptual plane (specifically, as a function of the degree of synchronicity/asynchronicity).

The solution we propose is also compatible with Márton Petykó’s internet linguistics model [27]. Petykó contends that *computer-mediated communication* [11] centers on medially written rather than medially spoken linguistic expressions, implying that “written spoken language” [3] and analogous terms suggesting transition may therefore be misleading [27, 153–154]. The internet language is therefore unequivocally a written language register; it cannot be viewed as a medially transitional category. As in the Koch–Oesterreicher model [18] further developed by Dürscheid [6], diversity manifests itself on the conceptual plane in his framework as well, leading him to categorize medially written linguistic expressions as “spontaneous written language” or “planned written language” [27]. A spontaneous written expression is, for example, an informally styled Messenger message, whereas a planned one is a formal email [12, 88–89].

In the interest of completeness, we shall also investigate the third possibility proposed by Veszelszki [35, 41]: the potential classification of digilect as a functional style. Veszelszki bases her proposition on the fact that, according to the academic literature [33, 63; 36, 48], a functional style is not a lect evolved on a social or territorial basis, but is rather

a linguistic subsystem that has evolved historically under the influence of prevailing circumstances and is a functionally distinct mode of communication [32, 198]. It remains unclear, however, whether she views digilect as a written functional style (cf. academic style, journalistic style, official style, literary style, letter style) or a spoken functional style (cf. conversational style, oratorical style, presentation style), or whether she treats it as an intermediate category analogous to mediolect. In the absence of a more detailed elaboration and precise categorization, we reject this possibility. This is further compounded by the difficulty of situating internet language in a typology that, according even to István Szathmári, a major figure in Hungarian stylistics, is not yet “satisfactorily developed” [32], not to mention the controversial nature of its designation: not only is functional style designated, among other things, as functional style, style type and style genre in Hungarian and foreign stylistics, but László Kálmán and Viktor Trón [15, 37] even treat it as a direct synonym for register (a synonym for the same *register* among whose written varieties we have already placed internet language as a mediolect, as placed above).

Discussion and conclusions

Hungarian and international academic literature has been dealing with internet language for decades (e. g., [5; 14; 35]), but generally fails to clearly define precisely what kind of phenomenon (language variety) is being discussed. The reason for this is that placing internet language within the typology of language varieties is such a difficult task that even the attempt can draw criticism from others (e. g., [6; 28; 31]). Among the possibilities offered by Ágnes Veszelszki [34; 35] (sociolect, mediolect, functional style), identification as a mediolect seems to be the most well-founded. Our line of argument is therefore as follows: internet language is one of the mediolects (language varieties distinguished by medium) [cf. 35, 38] among the written language [cf. 7, 61] registers [cf. 8] and we find István Lanstyák’s [22; 24] language variation model predicated on Michael Halliday’s dialect/register dichotomy [9, 87; 10, 35] to be the most suitable for its categorization: a register because it is use-dependent (used while surfing the Internet), written language because it is encoded by visual signs (even if specific genres are dominated by spoken language stylistic features), and a mediolect because it is connected to the Internet as a medium (communication channel).

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