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Kis Magyaróra: Learning a Language Through Applied Art

ABSTRACT

This paper presents Kis magyaróra (Little Hungarian Lesson), an artistic research project that explores visualization and drawing as aids in learning the Hungarian language. Building on Rudolf Arnheim's understanding of visual thinking as equal to verbal thinking, the project develops a personal visual system in which linguistic structures, word formation, and other specificities of the language are translated into drawings, expressive typography, and mnemonic images. The theoretical framework connects medieval memory culture, semiotics, the Gestalt principle of closure in comics, and Jacques Rancière's notion of intellectual emancipation. The results are a series of three risograph-printed zines, each accompanied by a poster and a learning card. The project argues that learning can be a creative rather than a merely reproductive process, and that a personal visual system can become readable to others when it relies on shared, collective experience.

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KEY WORDS
Drawing, semiotics, visual learning, mnemonic image, visualization, Hungarian language

1. Introduction

This paper explores the possibilities of visualization and artistic interpretation as aids in learning the Hungarian language. Through a series of drawings that illustrate different linguistic structures, ways of word formation, and other specificities of the language, it proposes an approach to learning based on visual communication.

It also contributes to the understanding of how visual approaches can enrich the cognitive processes involved in acquiring knowledge, and opens space for further research into the interaction of art and education in the field of language and communication.

The project is rooted in a combination of curiosity about the Hungarian language and culture and a visual way of learning that the author developed spontaneously, having never adapted well to the conventional educational system and needing to find her own way of remembering material. Hungarian, often considered one of the most demanding languages to learn, is approached here from the perspective of a complete beginner, and its perceived difficulty is questioned by laying visual foundations that anyone can understand.

By presenting the language in a creative and accessible way, the project also aims to lower the initial barrier to learning and to popularize it. The research method is artistic and is not burdened by the need for a strictly scientific or didactic outcome. Visualization is understood here as the process of translating abstract linguistic content into concrete visual form. The process of visualization is not treated as the final result, but as a way of seeing – a method for gaining insight into how one learns and understands. Throughout the paper, the question is raised whether the role of strict rationality in learning is overestimated, and how a more creative approach might be developed. The result is a series of three zines, each with an accompanying poster and learning card. The zine, a small-format printed or digital publication usually focused on a single topic, was chosen as the format for its ease of production and distribution.

2. Theoretical background

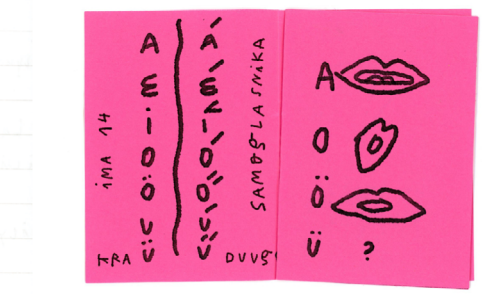
The principle "everything is in everything," formulated by the educator Joseph Jacotot and presented by Rancière, proposes that any knowledge, once truly acquired, is proof of the ability to learn (Rancière, 1991).

Someone who has learned to ride a bicycle has, in essence, demonstrated the capacity to learn to solve complex equations. This idea helped reframe the author's unease with conventional ways of learning: what was needed was simply a way to learn. Part of that way was the visual coding of content , such as grouping, marking categories with small drawings, and connecting things by association.

The idea for the project emerged from such spontaneous drawing during individual Hungarian lessons (Figure 1). Since the language was completely foreign and there was no existing knowledge to connect it to, the material was explained through familiar objects, jokes, imaginary characters, and situations. Two factors proved important: undivided attention during lessons, and the informality of individual lessons, which left freedom to master the material in a personally suitable way. It also became apparent that this kind of visual thinking quickly led to the question of what the essence of a new idea or concept is. The drawing demanded the most concise form of information.



(a)



(b)

» **Figure 1:** *Sketches in a notebook for Hungarian lessons (a) and the original Kis magyaróra zine (b), A. Komadina, 2024*

2.1. Visual thinking

In school, we are encouraged to rely mostly on logic and the linearity of language, yet artists have long understood intuitively that the visual domain constitutes a different kind of memory and learning. In the broadest sense, visual learning refers to the way people understand and remember information presented through images, diagrams, maps, and other visual means. Images are more than representations of words; they are a form of thinking in their own right, deeply connected to the ways we perceive and understand the world.

Rudolf Arnheim treats visual perception as a form of conceptual knowledge that is distinct from, yet closely intertwined with, language-based cognition (Arnheim, 1969). He regards visual thinking as equal to verbal thinking and emphasizes that aesthetic and visual language is present in everyday life, including scientific discourse, where diagrams and tables are responsible for order, clarity, and the relationship between meaning and form. The value of visual design is therefore not in dispute; what is often questioned is the equality of visual and verbal thinking, the latter being generally accepted as dominant.

Arnheim distinguishes intellectual from intuitive cognition. Intellectual cognition is what we usually mean by "thinking": it proceeds analytically, step by step, is most often expressed in language, and builds understanding linearly from the simple to the complex. Intuitive cognition takes place within perception itself, simultaneously and interwovenly, as when looking at a picture: understanding is immediate and whole, while details are discovered gradually. Although intellectual cognition is often regarded as superior, both play their part in thinking. Arnheim illustrated this with an experiment in which participants were asked to represent various concepts through drawing; while describing their drawings, they realized they had come to understand their own relationship to those concepts better. Drawing was not merely an external manifestation of thought but, like writing, a means of exploring and forming it (Arnheim, 1969).

The boundary between the linearity of speech and reading and the spatiality and simultaneity of looking or drawing is not as sharp as it appears. As Saussure observes, regardless of the linearity of speech, words in memory are organized associatively and branch out, mirroring the way visual information is experienced, where associative structure can be immediately visible in space (Saussure, 1959). The two processes naturally build upon each other.

2.2. Medieval memory culture

Memory (Lat. *memoria*) held far greater value in the Middle Ages. With limited opportunities for writing things down, people relied on their inner worlds to store knowledge, and memorization was a fundamentally creative skill involving both deep understanding of the material and ways of recalling it. The idea of mapping knowledge with the help of imagination dates back to ancient Rome: the method of loci, today better known as the memory palace, involved mentally arranging images within an imagined space so that they could be recalled when needed. Systematized in the rhetorical text *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, the method passed into

the education of orators and lawyers and, through the preservation of ancient texts in monasteries, into medieval monastic practice, where authors such as Hugh of Saint Victor adapted it to spiritual contemplation and the memorization of sacred texts (Carruthers, 2008).

Carruthers (2008) describes two key processes: *divisio*, the division of a whole into smaller parts, and *compositio*, the assembly of those parts into a composition to be memorized. The composition gives a broad picture of the relationships between elements, while the elements themselves serve as mnemonic triggers for the story or concept being remembered. Illuminations in manuscripts were not regarded as representations of reality but as material for contemplation and a kind of reading – access points to a wider mental library.

A mnemonic device can be defined as any technique, image, or structure that facilitates memory by linking new content with something already known or easily imagined. Illuminations also had another important function: to teach the reader a model of thinking, a scheme of how one can think visually (Carruthers, 2008).

A notable example is Thomas Murner's *Logica Memorativa*, a system for teaching Aristotelian logic to schoolchildren, published in 1509 and describing a card game for learning (Figure 2). Each card depicts a scene in which the relationships between elements correspond to the logical relationships they illustrate. The cards carry no explanatory text and rely entirely on the analogy between image and logical concept; a detailed description is given only in the book (Campos Benítez, 2019).



» **Figure 2:** *Card depicting a logical concept, Logica Memorativa, Thomas Murner, 1509 (Campos Benítez, 2019)*

Research on imagery mnemonics offers one explanation for why medieval mnemonic imagery was so often strange: the advantage commonly attributed to bizarre images lies less in bizarreness itself than in the uniqueness of the encoding – the more specific an association, the easier it is to recall (Lesgold & Goldman, 1973).
With the spread of books and literacy and the move toward greater rationality in the Enlightenment, the way information was stored changed, and this skill lost its popularity. Images continued to make their own revolutions, as in Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, but they became more realistic and turned toward describing the external world. Today, mnemonic techniques are mostly used with children, most familiarly in alphabet books, where letters are learned in association with familiar objects and creatures. It seems accepted that children learn most easily this way, but it remains unclear why the same approach is considered unsuitable for older learners and adults.

2.3. Personal and collective ways of reading

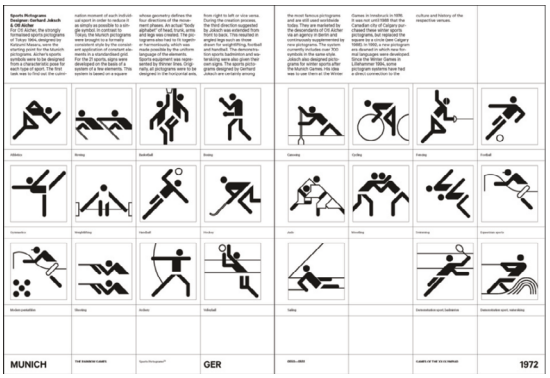
Medieval illuminations remain understandable hundreds of years later, although they were made for a relatively small group of people. One answer to why may lie in the relationship between the personal and the collective. Personal systems of visual communication might seem too idiosyncratically coded to be understood, yet people are shaped by their surroundings – community and culture – which may be the key to reading personal works. Otl Aicher's pictograms for the 1972 Munich Olympics were built on a strictly defined grid, using only certain angles and abstracted depictions of people and objects (Figure 3a). The design philosophy rested on strictly defined rules rather than emotion, and its aim was universality – a sign that communicates regardless of who is looking at it – reflecting the spirit of post-war Germany, which sought to present itself as rational, modern, and international. In the same year, Wolfgang Schmidt began *Lebenszeichen* (*Signs of Life*; Figure 3b).

Although visually refined in a similar way, it had the opposite aim: to describe the personal through visual play, as a systematic visual inventory of the human body, emotions, states, and experiences. Of 893 planned pictograms, Schmidt realized 262, and later applied them to posters, books, installations, and commercial projects.

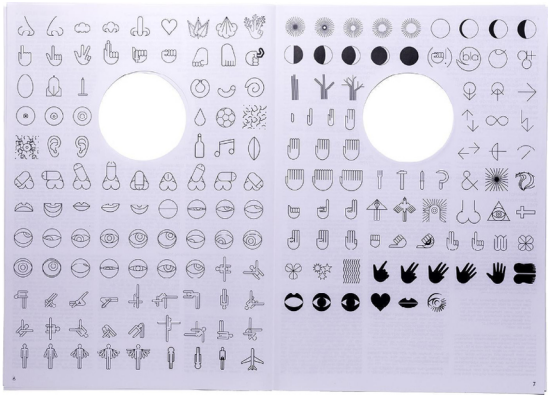
Schmidt's work can be seen as a forerunner of today's emoji, whose role is precisely personal expression and the description of human experience. Unlike Aicher's system, which starts from predefined parameters, Schmidt's developed over time: visual thinking follows the inner logic of the visual thinker, and the system emerges through accumulation. What made *Signs of Life* readable as a game, a system, and a means of expression was the shared, collective experience of corporeality, emotion, and narrative.

This is why the word collective, which implies shared knowledge and values that enable reading through implicit understanding, is used here instead of universal, which implies neutrality and the absence of values.

The same idea can be examined through perhaps the most universal human experience – language. Saussure defines language as a system of signs that express ideas, in which no sign is autonomous: its meaning derives exclusively from its relationships with other signs within the system. Language is a convention, and the nature of the agreed sign makes little difference, which is why Saussure compares language with other sign systems such as traffic signs, military signals, or sign language (Saussure, 1959). It follows that intelligibility arises not from a correspondence between sign and reality but from the internal consistency of the system itself: any set of visual signs that stand in some relationship to one another becomes, in theory, readable.



(a)



(b)

» **Figure 3:** *Pictograms for the Munich Olympic Games, Otl Aicher, 1972 (a; The Olympic Design, n.d.); Signs of Life, Wolfgang Schmidt, 1972 (b; Weirich, n.d.)*

2.4. Comics and visual narratives

Comics are a good illustration of this idea, since their understanding also depends on the relationship between the whole and its parts. Scott McCloud explains how we understand comics as a whole, although they move from panel to panel, through the Gestalt principle of closure – "observing the parts but perceiving the whole" (McCloud, 1993, p. 63) – the way we fill in visual information missing between panels and mentally create a meaningful whole. The principle appears in many historical periods. The Bayeux Tapestry, made in the 11th century, depicts a series of temporally separate events – coronation, negotiations, preparations for invasion, the crossing of the sea, and the Battle of Hastings in 1066 – which read as a clear story, like a comic. In the bands above and below the main scenes, there are parallel narratives, characters, and symbols relying on culturally established knowledge, such as the social and political context, familiarity with Aesop's fables, and the symbolism of the time. McCloud (1993) also describes *non-sequitur* transitions, sequences of seemingly unrelated panels that become a whole simply by being placed in sequence; by the same principle, a collage is perceived as a whole although it combines very different materials. The format, the page, and the series of pages are therefore key to perceiving parts as connected, suggesting that visual understanding is far more elastic than mere enrichment or interpretation of text.

2.5. Who is a good student?

For Rancière (1991), learning is one of the fundamental properties of human intelligence. He compares this natural ability to solving riddles and to connecting what we already know with what we want to learn, citing the mother tongue, which all children master through communication, attempts, failures, and play. Children also learn visual language through drawing: they use it to imagine, describe objects and beings, and recall what interests them, categorizing, deconstructing, and exploring relationships between things without instruction. Most people therefore have experience of visual learning, but this language is forgotten because it is not cultivated.

In school, the learning process becomes alienated, and understanding is turned into absolutes and dichotomies of right and wrong, with interpretation in the hands of an authority who decides whether an understanding is correct. Because understanding is placed in the hands of another, the world begins to divide into two intelligences, inferior and superior – a distinction that finds parallels with Arnheim's intuitive and intellectual cognition. Rancière calls this pattern the circle of powerlessness, and opposes to it intellectual emancipation: the awareness of the equality of intelligences, and the conviction that what makes a person incapable of learning is not a lack of instruction but the belief in the inferiority of one's own intelligence. The most an emancipated person can do for another is to encourage them to become emancipated too (Rancière, 1991), and one way of doing so is to offer one's own model of thinking. One reading of this project is precisely as such an offer.

2.6. Characteristics of the Hungarian language

Before the lessons, Hungarian was almost entirely unfamiliar. It shares some similarities with Serbian, including certain identical or similar words, especially in everyday domains such as food or administration, and both languages have phonetic scripts, so the logic of reading is the same. However, Hungarian has 14 vowels compared with five in Serbian, which initially makes correct reading difficult, especially since a wrong vowel can completely change the meaning of a word. The differences are more numerous still: surnames are written before first names, dates follow the year-month-day format, and the end of a sentence often determines its meaning. Hungarian belongs to the Finno-Ugric family, but shares very few useful similarities with Finnish.

Hungarian is an agglutinative language, meaning that words are formed by adding suffixes and prefixes to a root. From the root *tan*, for example, as many as 16 different terms can be derived, from *tanár* (teacher) to *hangtan* (phonetics). Suffixes express location, possession, position, and movement, while verbal prefixes can change the meaning of a verb entirely (Gyöngyösi & Hetesy, 2014; Lingvopedia, n.d.).

A good example is the sentence *Kimegyek az állatkertből* (I am going out of the zoo): *állat* – animal, *kert* – garden, *-ből* – suffix meaning "out of"; *ki-* – verbal prefix meaning "out," added to *megy* – to go; and *-ek* – ending for the first person singular, present tense. What makes Hungarian particularly interesting for visualization is the combination of strict grammatical rules and vivid compound words, as well as a script in which diacritics, found on nine vowels, give an expressive and playful character.

At the beginning it is important to understand the basic rules and logic of the language, while learning vocabulary leaves ample room for imagination. Two examples that became illustrations in the zines are *bundáskenyér* (French toast), literally "bread in a fur coat" (*bunda* – fur coat, *kenyér* – bread), and *nagynéni* (aunt), literally "big auntie" (*nagy* – big, *néni* – auntie).

3. Methods

The first step took place in the context of Hungarian lessons, as described above. The visualization of the material first happened through sketches, followed by a phase of shaping the sketches into drawings and grouping them into thematic units. After that, the work focused on ways of understanding and navigating the content that would make it easier to read. The final part of the process was the production of the zines, posters, and cards, and attention to the material qualities of the objects, whereby the whole work turns fully toward the reader.

3.1. Understanding and memorizing through visualization

The guiding principle of visualization in learning is simple: connecting the unknown with the known. Vowel harmony, for example – the principle by which the choice of a suffix is determined by the type of vowels in the word – was personified as an opera singer (Figure 4). The character is familiar and clear in memory, and her expressive pose is amusing, which increases the chance that she will be remembered; the whole image serves as a mnemonic trigger for the concept of vowel harmony. Spontaneity is an integral part of the process, since associations arise while focusing on the material rather than on the act of drawing. Through an expressive and free visual language, an imaginary world of Hungarian is built, creating a deeper connection with the language: the thought process does not end with understanding a word but extends into associative mapping and emotional acceptance. This whole process is an act of visual thinking in Arnheim's sense – the drawings are not illustrations of content or literal situations, but a way of thinking and of arriving at the essence of what is being learned.

3.2. Shaping the content

The second part of the process involved building on the basic drawings. The opera singer, for instance, was connected with the relevant material – the two main groups of vowels, high and low. The high vowels are placed at the top of the opposite page and the low vowels at the bottom, so that the whole visual appearance of the spread can be memorized and the material recalled through the arrangement of its elements and the relationships between them (Figure 4). Typography also contributed to memorization in various ways, sometimes because the letterform itself was expressive or contained something that could be connected with the object it names, and sometimes because the nature of the stroke conveyed the feeling of the word: *jeges* (icy) looks as if it is shivering, while *forró* (hot) looks as if it is burning.

The original zine served as a guide to the feeling to be preserved in the work (Figure 5). The visual language partly retains the rawness of sketches, associated with sincerity and immediacy. Three interrelated thematic units emerged from the material: the first covering the basic rules of Hungarian, the second more specific grammatical rules and an introduction to sentence building, and the third the memorization of words. A dominant color was chosen for each, evoking, respectively, accessibility, focus, and fun. The original zine fit on a single A4 sheet and served mainly as a reminder and a curiosity; the aim then was only to shape sketches into drawings and connect them into a whole instead of leaving them scattered across a notebook. The zine format, popular among subcultures that do not necessarily have a wide audience, was retained

for its immediacy, small dimensions, and low production cost, and adapted to the expanded content.



(a)



(b)

» **Figure 4:** *Opera singer drawing and extension of the content, Kis magyaróra I (Serbian-language edition), A. Komadina, 2026*



(a)



(b)

» **Figure 5:** *Spread from the original Kis magyaróra zine, 2024 (a) and from Kis magyaróra III, 2026 (b), A. Komadina*

3.3. Communicating with the reader

An important motivation for shaping the illustrations into zines was the wish to share a new approach to learning with two groups of readers: people who already learn Hungarian or are interested in Hungarian culture, and others who may have no particular interest in the language but are drawn to the visual language. The last step therefore involved looking at the content from a distance, consciously considering the reader for the first time. The aim was for the content to sit on the border between intelligibility and play, preserving a sense of discovery while offering enough explanation to remain understandable.

Addressing the reader is also visually coded through the Work Sans typeface, which is neutral in relation to the handwriting but round and friendly (Figure 6b). It carries background information – instructions on how to read a page, short grammar rules, or simply the title of a topic. Navigation symbols indicate that the material is easy (Figure 6a), that it builds on something from another zine, or that it is an example of the topic at hand; they are vector-precise and refined, matching the code used for addressing the reader. Reading thus requires a degree of intellectual independence and the will to build understanding rather than receive the material through exhaustive instructions, reflecting Rancière's thesis of intellectual emancipation. The approach relies on the natural human capacity for narrative closure (McCloud, 1993) and on the intuitive understanding of a whole through its parts, which is the logic of language itself (Saussure, 1959).



(a)



(b)

» **Figure 6:** *Star symbol indicating easy material (a) and Work Sans in relation to handwriting (b), Kis magyaróra II, A. Komadina, 2026*

The learning cards and posters have a dual function: they can be used for learning, but also serve as decorative objects. Even in the latter case, they keep their original role, since through constant exposure learning happens unobtrusively. The posters were made on the same principle as the zines, with familiar illustrations extended with new material (Figure 7). The whole series – zines, cards, and posters – functions as a mnemonic map, that is, as mnemonic triggers organized into a whole.



(a)



(b)

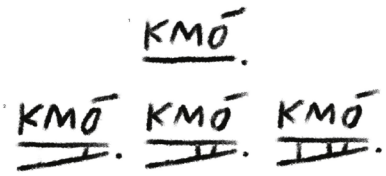
» **Figure 7:** *A6 page from Kis magyaróra III (a) and the related A3 poster (b), A. Komadina, 2026*

In addition to the printed version, the work exists in digital form, which allows easy and relatively inexpensive reproduction and use.



» **Figure 8:** *Zines Kis magyaróra I, II, and III with posters, A. Komadina, 2026*

The production also has a sustainable character. All material was risograph-printed, mostly in a single color, with the exception of details in the zines. Risograph printing has a smaller environmental footprint than laser or inkjet printing, as it uses soy- or rice-bran-based inks instead of inks with toxic solvents and prints without heat, significantly reducing energy consumption. The work is bound with a hand stapler, and most of the printed material was used. The series has a flexible logo that can denote both individual issues and the whole series (Figure 9), leaving the series open to visual continuation without loss of consistency.



» **Figure 9:** *Logo of the Kis magyaróra series, A. Komadina, 2026*

4. Results

The three zines present the basic grammatical rules and some linguistic features of Hungarian. Through a series of visual associations and short written explanations, they show how learning can itself be a creative process and propose a different approach to learning languages and to acquiring new knowledge in general.

The series, titled *Kis magyaróra I, II,* and *III*, consists of zines with accompanying learning cards, bound together with bands containing short usage guidelines, and posters (Figure 8). The zines and cards are A6, while the posters are A3.

5. Discussion

The series can be read in several ways: as an aid to learning, as an introduction to and advocate for learning a new language, and as an object with aesthetic value. The last and broadest reading connects directly to the medieval understanding of visual mnemonic devices as mental models for thinking and remembering.

Just as Schmidt's *Signs of Life* became readable through shared experience, the personal associations in the zines rely on collective knowledge, such as familiar characters, everyday objects, and humor, which allows others to read a system that originated as a private learning tool.

The project has firm conceptual foundations in learning and visualization, as well as a clear visual language, which opens space for further development in several directions. An interpretation in digital space, through a website or an application, would make the content more accessible, add a layer of interactivity and play, and raise the question of the role of movement in memory. Within applied arts, the series could be expanded with additional posters and cards or other functional objects. Since the method is artistic, its effect on other learners has not yet been systematically evaluated, and testing the materials with different groups of learners would be a valuable next step. The most ambitious direction would be to examine the possibilities for an entirely new, more personal and intuitive model of learning and teaching, applied to languages but also to other fields of knowledge.

6. Conclusions

Drawing is a tool for thinking, and it can create a space in which acquiring knowledge is a creative process. This project examined how drawing can translate linguistic structures and create a personal space of meaning. The process shows that visual learning rests not only on the aesthetic dimension of the image but on its capacity to organize, transform, and convey meaning through a system of associations. The visual interpretation of Hungarian lessons demonstrated how the symbolic system of a language can be translated into a visual system with its own logic, in which each illustration functions as part of a mnemonic map and visual patterns are remembered through form and emotional context, not only through rules.

The zine format plays an important role, becoming an object that imitates the thought process: a portable set of mnemonic triggers and a diary of learning, through which visual thinking becomes visible and accessible to others. In the spirit of Rancière's emancipated learner, the reader is offered a model of visual thinking. On a theoretical level, the work supports Arnheim's thesis of the unity of perception and thinking: the visual image is not a reproduction of a concept but its equivalent in thought. Most contemporary educational systems still rely predominantly on linear ways of learning, although memory is by nature associative and tied to emotion. The advantages of a visual, simultaneous, and personal system of learning may be especially important at a time when linear reasoning is increasingly left to machines.

7. Acknowledgments

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