

The Emergence of Natural Science Content in Nineteenth-Century Hungarian Primary School Readers¹

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Abstract

This study examines the representation of scientific content in nineteenth-century Hungarian primary school readers. In this period, readers intended for the upper grades served both as tools for reading practice and for conveying knowledge and moral values. A comparative analysis of the structure of the German and Hungarian readers examined here indicates that natural science material constituted, on average, fifty percent of their content. This finding suggests that reading books for grades 5 and 6 played an important role in the teaching of the natural sciences in primary schools during this period. To understand this phenomenon, the study examines how the transfer of genre characteristics within the Central European educational space intersected with pedagogical demands arising from the contemporary educational infrastructure of Hungary, and how these dynamics influenced and were reflected in the thematic structure of the readers.

Keywords: elementary school reader; natural science; textbook research; nineteenth-century Hungary

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Introduction

If one examines a nineteenth-century Hungarian or German primary school reader, it becomes evident that, in addition to literary texts, poems, and stories, it also contains a smaller or larger corpus of subject-specific passages aligned with various areas of the curriculum. These include texts related to geography, natural history, physics, and economics. The higher the intended grade level of the reader, the more pronounced this tendency becomes. A likely explanation is that the reader served as the most fundamental teaching aid of the era, fulfilling multiple functions: moral and religious instructions, the teaching and practice of reading, and the transmission of knowledge. The appearance of natural scientific material was significantly shaped by which of these functions was considered more important at any given time.

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This study investigates the knowledge transfer function of nineteenth-century Hungarian primary school readers with particular reference to natural science content. Through a thematic analysis of the readers and an examination of the pedagogical principles underlying their organisation, it is possible to draw conclusions about their educational objectives.² The analysis focuses on readers written for grades 5 and 6, as these levels placed increased demands on subject-specific instruction within the framework of the readers.

In order to understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to outline the development of the reader as a genre within the broader history of education. Hungarian readers were shaped most profoundly by those produced in German-speaking countries, which is why this study focuses on transfer processes related to readers within the Central European educational space. At the same time, the function, didactics, and content of readers were greatly influenced by external factors that defined the educational context, including the type of school and the number of the teaching staff, the nature of its maintainer, the characteristics of the settlement it served, and the regulatory framework of education comprising current legislation, regulations, and curricula.

The study first reviews nineteenth-century pedagogical transfer processes in Central Europe with particular reference to reading books, and then examines the status of natural science subjects in Hungarian primary education on the basis of educational laws, regulations, and curricula. Finally, it attempts to draw conclusions about the knowledge-transfer function of readers by comparing the structures of German- and Hungarian-language readers. A detailed content analysis of the natural science material contained in these readers lies beyond the scope of this study; accordingly, the discussion is confined to the aspects outlined above.³

Pedagogical transfer processes in the nineteenth century

The teaching of basic natural sciences has not always been common in the history of education. Following the scientific developments of the seventeenth century, a new worldview grounded in the natural sciences emerged during the Enlightenment, particularly under the influence of enlightened absolutism. This development began to take shape in the final third of the eighteenth century and became widespread across Central Europe by the nineteenth century. By this time, the educa-

² According to Wolfgang Jacobmeyer, textbooks do not merely impart knowledge, they also embody what the adult generation considers as worth knowing. In this respect, textbooks constitute selected collections that convey values, forms of behaviour, motivations, educational aims and social conventions (Jacobmeyer 1987, 235). This observation may also be applied to natural science content of readers.

³ According to Peter Weinbrenner's observations on the complexity of textbooks, it is not possible to examine all aspects of a textbook simultaneously. Consequently, textbook research is more practically conducted by focusing on particular characteristics, content elements, or functions (Aspektforschung) (Weinbrenner 1995, 40).

tional systems of emerging nation states – having introduced compulsory schooling under state supervision – mandated the inclusion of natural science subjects in public education, as stipulated in contemporary policy documents. In Hungary, the teaching of natural sciences in elementary public schools can be traced to the reception of philanthropic pedagogy from German-speaking regions and to the *Ratio Educationis* of 1777. It became firmly established following the Primary School Law of 1868, which made public education compulsory (Németh 2005).

Contemporary research into educational phenomena characterised by transfer and adaptation processes commonly situates the interpretation of interactions between different educational spaces within the paradigm of the spatial turn. This paradigm conceives of space not as an objective, external entity, but as a social construct. Educational processes that can be analysed in spatial terms include, among others, the emergence of educational systems, the diffusion of various university models, and the development of teaching professions (Kesper –Biermann 2013, 21–41).

Comparative education analyses and draws conclusions about the structures, specific modes of operation, and cultural characteristics of different educational systems by comparing the institutional frameworks of various countries and regions. The main types of educational systems – the Atlantic and the Continental, together with the latter's two subtypes, the French and the German models – emerged from distinct historical trajectories. As a consequence of these developments, the German model exerted the strongest influence on the evolution of the Hungarian educational system during the nineteenth century (Kozma 2006).

András Németh examined the history of Hungarian pedagogy from multiple perspectives and concluded that developments in German pedagogy, alongside the adoption of the Humboldtian university model, had a profound impact on the development of Hungarian educational science and its institutionalisation at the university level. He, therefore, interpreted the history of Hungarian educational science within the framework of the Central European model of pedagogical development. At the same time, specific developmental trends can be observed in relation to the history of professionalisation in certain European regions. For example, the different models of higher education systems underlie the Anglo-Saxon and continental approaches to professional development. Hungarian professions, including both primary and secondary school teachers, followed the distinctive trajectory of Central European expertise (Németh 2002; Németh 2005). Similarly, the development of textbooks and readers can be understood within the context of these broader processes through the concepts of transfer, reception, and adaptation.

The European educational space (*Bildungsraum*) in the nineteenth century was shaped to a considerable extent by interactions between national and international spheres. Although centralised and standardised education systems were established within the frameworks of emerging nation states – albeit with marked chronological disparities – sustained contact and exchange among educational experts and institutions nevertheless persisted across national boundaries. Such interactions, together with the increasing consolidation of mechanisms for knowledge transfer, gave rise – albeit temporarily – to the formation of international edu-

cational spaces. These manifested through personal networks, media representations, processes of reception and institutional cooperation, as well as through the establishment and use of international forums (Möller – Wischmeyer 2013, 7–20).

In this regard, throughout the nineteenth century, readers from German-speaking countries functioned as media representations of Central European pedagogical knowledge for the majority of Hungarian textbook authors. The adoption of this body of knowledge – whether through literal translations, the adaptation of texts to specifically Hungarian conditions, or the incorporation of pedagogical principles that shaped the structure of readers – contributed significantly to the evolution of the Hungarian reader as a genre.

German patterns

During the Enlightenment, the influence of technological progress on both the economy and education had already become apparent. In the eighteenth century, the pedagogical movement that emerged in German-speaking countries, known as philanthropy, aimed to impart practical knowledge that would prepare students for their prospective occupations. In the model institutions founded by advocates of this movement, the teaching of natural sciences – regarded as essential for vocational training – occupied a prominent place. The philanthropic ideal was that of a well-educated, hard-working citizen, capable of achieving individual success while contributing to society and the common good through his or her profession.

Until the final third of the eighteenth century, the primary function of public schools was to impart basic skills and provide religious education. Textbooks, in the modern sense, did not yet exist; instead, the Bible served as the principal tool for teaching and practising reading. Friedrich Eberhard von Rochow changed this situation, becoming the first to adapt the philanthropic educational programme to rural conditions. In 1773, he established the first philanthropic school on his estate in the village of Reckahn. As a landowner, he recognised the relationship between the rational, economically driven development of agriculture and the reform of the public schools operating on his estate. His goal was to educate and cultivate the rural population. To this end, he wrote textbooks, built schools, provided teacher training and personally financed teachers' salaries (Tenorth 2003, 128; Mayer 2003, 19–35).

Rochow's reader, *Kinderfreund*, was composed with close attention to the specific characteristics of childhood and with the explicit aim of promoting the spread of readers that were both comprehensible and genuinely beneficial to children. Published in 1776, it was intended to bridge the gap between the traditional spelling books (*Fibel*) and the Bible.⁴ The reader consists of 79 short, moralising parables, each averaging around 150 words and written in plain, accessible language suited to young readers. Its dual purpose was to provide both technical and En-

⁴ "Nevertheless, the author believes that, until a better book is written, this one will suitably fill the large gap between spelling books and the Bible" (Rochow 1781, 4).

lightenment-oriented knowledge, as well as religious and moral instruction. Alongside its moral content, the *Kinderfreund* also contains readings on natural phenomena, including texts on magnifying glasses, magnets, the globe, plant growth, beekeeping, agriculture, and animal husbandry. The influence of *Kinderfreund* is underscored by its translation into several European languages and its adaptation for use across a wide range of regional and denominational settings (Bruns 1993, 124–128).

With the growing interest in natural sciences, the demand for teaching materials that conveyed scientific knowledge alongside theological and moralising texts increased, reflecting both the differentiation of the sciences and the development of professional fields (Bruns 1993, 102–103). Consequently, the function of readers expanded beyond the practice of reading and the provision of moral instruction to include the transmission of knowledge, some of which derived directly from the natural sciences. A notable example of this is the work of German theologian Friedrich Philipp Wilmsen, who – drawing on Rochow’s model adapted to rural contexts – published his reader and textbook *Der deutsche Kinderfreund, ein Lesebuch für Volksschulen* in 1801. This work was intended to address the educational needs of the middle classes (Sydow 1898, 309–311). According to the 99th edition, published in Berlin in 1828 (Wilmsen 1828), the volume comprises the following content units: speech and comprehension exercises, moral stories following Rochow’s model, sections on the world, the earth and its inhabitants, the earth’s natural products (animal and plant life, minerals), human beings, health, religion, time, natural phenomena, Europe, Germany, the rights and duties of subjects, songs and chants, and proverbs.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Hungarian education, pedagogical thought and school readers were influenced primarily by German pedagogical traditions. As a consequence, most Hungarian reading books were based on translations and adaptations, which were then supplemented with material specific to the Hungarian context. Two early nineteenth-century examples merit mention here: István Lángy’s *A’ Magyar Gyermekek Barátja (The Friend of Hungarian Children)* and Pál Edvi Illés’s *Első oktatásra szolgáló kézikönyv (Handbook for Early Education)*. In a manner akin to Wilmsen’s approach, both works present, in an encyclopaedic fashion, the body of knowledge considered essential for teaching in public schools at the time. Lángy’s book is largely a translation of Wilmsen’s work adapted to Hungarian conditions, while Edvi incorporated excerpts from the writings of several German authors (Lángy 1829; Edvi 1837; Fischerné Dárdai 2007, 40–41). At the time, the inclusion of natural science subjects in primary school readers represented an entirely new development.

The beginnings of teaching natural sciences in Hungarian primary schools

In Hungary, the content of the school curriculum was first defined and standardised during the period of enlightened absolutism, following the educational reforms introduced under Maria Theresa. According to the *Ratio Educationis I* (1777), the basic tasks of primary schools were the teaching of reading, writing, arithmetic, and religion. The natural sciences played a role only insofar as they supported the subsequent acquisition of practical skills. This approach was likewise reflected in the system of school types established by the *Ratio*, which were differentiated on territorial and social grounds: native language schools in villages, native language schools in market towns, native language schools in free royal towns, and model schools responsible for training teachers. Instruction in the natural sciences appeared only in the urban native language schools staffed by three teachers and in the model schools. In these institutions, Latin was replaced by „the basic principles of geometry and physics, as well as drawing and all the skills necessary for those who will not go on to Latin school” (*Ratio Educationis* 1981, 71).

In the *Ratio Educationis II* (1806), natural science subjects continued to be taught exclusively in the urban native language schools. Pupils intending to pursue crafts or agriculture were instructed in natural history, technology, geography, and commodity knowledge relevant to trade (*Ratio Educationis* 1981, 231–238). Section 27 prescribed the following textbooks for rural and market town schools: a catechism, an alphabet book, a calligraphy book, an arithmetic book, and “a book for practising reading. This covers the fundamentals of physics and natural history, the key principles of agriculture, and an overview of the qualities of a good citizen. These were accompanied by short Latin examples for learning letters and pronunciation, as well as practising reading” (*Ratio Educationis* 1981, 240). Thus, the decree explicitly required that reading books intended for native language schools should convey basic scientific knowledge. The reading books produced by Lánggy and Edvi were written in this spirit and became the prototypes for science-infused reading books throughout the nineteenth century.

Beyond the regulation of content, the emergence and widespread adoption of the reader as a genre can also be attributed to a new pedagogical method. The reader, as a distinct type of textbook, appeared within the Habsburg Monarchy in conjunction with the introduction of the norm method, which was implemented in Hungary through the *Ratio Educationis I* and disseminated via the model schools. Developed by Ignaz Felbiger, the essence of the norm method lay in the collective, classroom-based processing of the texts contained in the reader. This took the form of guided discussions structured around questions posed by the teacher. The joint treatment of moral, historical, geographical, natural history, and natural science topics within the reader served a dual purpose: on the one hand, to develop pupils’ reading skills, and on the other, to impart knowledge and foster cognitive development (Mészáros – Németh – Pukánszky 2004, 104–105, 289).

Teaching natural sciences after 1868

Following the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, Hungarian education gained institutional independence and came under the authority of the Ministry of Religion and Public Education. Under the leadership of Minister József Eötvös, public education underwent a radical transformation, resulting in a diversified system of schools maintained by various bodies but operating under state supervision.⁵ The foundations of modern Hungarian public education were laid down in Act 1868:38. Only its provisions relevant to the present discussion are discussed here. In the six-year elementary public school – attendance at which was compulsory for children aged 6-12 – the curriculum included natural science subjects such as geography, natural history, and economics.⁶ A broadly similar range of subjects was prescribed for schools maintained by religious denominations; nevertheless, these institutions were granted the right to determine their own textbooks and teaching methods.⁷ However, all school providers were obliged to adhere to the curriculum issued by the Ministry of Religion and Public Education in 1869, which, in accordance with the provisions of the Public Education Act, prescribed the natural science subjects listed in Table 1.⁸

year	subject	content
1-2	speech and comprehension exercises	basic concepts of geography and natural history
3	geography	geography of the place of residence
4	geography	geography of the county and the country, the globe
5	geography	geography of Hungary and Europe, the Earth
	natural history	the three kingdoms of nature: the animal kingdom, the plant kingdom, and the mineral kingdom
	physics ⁹	natural phenomena

⁵ Schools could be maintained by the state, municipalities, religious denominations, associations and individuals.

⁶ 1868. évi XXXVIII. törvénycikk a népiskolai közoktatás tárgyában. 55.§ (<https://net.jogtar.hu/ezer-ev-torveny?docid=86800038.TV&searchUrl=/ezer-ev-torvenyei?keyword%3D1868>) [2025.07.12.]

⁷ 1868. évi XXXVIII. törvénycikk a népiskolai közoktatás tárgyában. 11.§ (<https://net.jogtar.hu/ezer-ev-torveny?docid=86800038.TV&searchUrl=/ezer-ev-torvenyei?keyword%3D1868>) [2025.07.12.]

⁸ Tanterv 1869.

⁹ In multi-teacher primary schools, the natural sciences were introduced as early as the fifth grade, whereas in single-teacher undivided schools, they were only taught in the sixth grade.

6	geography ¹⁰	astronomy
	natural history	three kingdoms of nature
	physics	natural phenomena

Table 1. Natural science subjects included in the 1869 curriculum

The subsequent curriculum of 1877 was essentially an expanded version of that of 1869, yet the additions concerning the role of textbooks merit quotation in full:

The other subjects, especially in elementary schools with a single teacher, may be taught by reading school readers and using reading materials. In addition to these, maps should be used for geography, and objects contained in collections compiled for this purpose should be used for the teaching of natural sciences; it is hardly possible to achieve any success in teaching of natural science and chemistry without the demonstration of experiments (Tanterv 1877, 34).

According to the curriculum, therefore, the teaching of natural sciences was to be grounded in the texts contained in the readers, supplemented by the teacher's demonstrations.

The lesson plans set out in the 1869 curriculum divided teaching time into quarter- and half-hour segments. In a fully graded primary school with six teachers, each teacher instructed a single class during each period. By contrast, in an undivided primary school – where one teacher was responsible for an average of 80 students spread across six year-groups – the teacher taught one class directly while assigning independent work to the others. On this basis alone, it is evident that undivided public school operated with far more limited possibilities for teaching individual subjects, including natural sciences. In such schools, the independent reading of texts found in readers, followed by discussion, likely assumed a more prominent role in the acquisition of scientific knowledge. As we shall see, several authors of readers recognised that, in undivided primary schools – where teachers had less time for explanation and demonstration, and where pupils were often required to work independently – readers needed to compensate by providing suitable material for the subjects being taught. In the second half of the nineteenth century, single-teacher undivided schools far outnumbered multi-teacher institutions, accounting for approximately 62 percent of schools nationwide (Kelemen 2009, 61–62).

Should the reader be expected to function as a textbook as well?

An important component of the educational reforms of 1868 was the regulation of textbooks. To this end, József Eötvös established a committee charged with the design and production of new teaching materials for elementary schools. These in-

¹⁰ Geography was only introduced into the sixth grade in the 1877 curriculum.

cluded spelling books, readers, subject-specific textbooks, and teacher's manuals (Mészáros 1989, 103–104). At the committee's inaugural meeting, held between 3 and 11 August 1868, a series of decisions were adopted that effectively shaped the emerging genre of reader. From the outset of its deliberations, the committee was compelled to confront the difficulties inherent in defining this genre.

[...] the president asks the following question: Should elementary school readers serve simultaneously as textbooks – namely, containing systematic outlines of the various subjects – or should they function purely as readers? Should separate textbooks be provided to pupils for the teaching of these subjects? After careful deliberation, the committee agreed that elementary school readers need not present the subjects taught in elementary schools in an exhaustive or highly detailed manner; because these subjects may be effectively conveyed through the teacher's lively exposition and through the provision of appropriate subject-specific textbooks. [...] If elementary school readers also incorporate dry, factual summaries in the form of reading passages, they can be neither genuine elementary school textbooks, nor interesting and instructive readers or suitable books for the home (*Néptanítók Lapja* 1868, 642).¹¹

According to the committee's decision, readers were to be used exclusively for the development of reading skills and not for the teaching of individual subjects. The acquisition of subject-specific knowledge was envisaged as taking place through direct instruction, with teachers also being able to draw upon the so-called “guide-lines”. These were short, notebook-like textbooks prepared for individual subjects, and were not intended to support independent study.

The protocol then outlined the principles for the development of subject-specific textbooks. It was followed by a summary of the requirements relating to the content of reading books for science subjects, organised by year group. In the first year of schooling, emphasis remained on the acquisition of basic reading techniques; accordingly, it is more appropriate to speak of spelling books rather than reading books. In Year 2, alongside the continued cultivation of fluent and meaningful reading, the content of the texts assumed greater importance, incorporating simple Bible stories, fairy tales, “illustrations of local products”, and folk songs. In Year 3, pupils' expressive reading was fostered through texts with moral themes and through “images selected from the natural world (geography, botany and natural history)”. By Year 4, the stated objective was to consolidate meaningful and expressive reading, drawing upon readers containing “further selection on folklore, geography, history, botany, natural science and handicrafts” (*Néptanítók Lapja* 1868, 645–646).

¹¹ A népiskolai olvasó-, tan- és vezérkönyvek kidolgozása tárgyában közoktatási m. kir. miniszter ur ő excellenciájára által összehívott bizottság értekezleteinek jegyzőkönyve, 1868 aug. 3-ától 11-ig. Read the original text in *Néptanítók Lapja*. 12 November 1868 (41).

Finally, the reading books prescribed for Years 5 and 6 stipulate that

“the readings should be scientific in content and selected with particular care so that they illuminate and enrich the subjects being taught, while also encouraging young people to think, investigate, and observe independently. At the same time, they should prompt pupils to reflect on what they have read, and to develop the capacity for reasoned learning. Texts judiciously chosen to dispel and clarify the superstitions and prejudices prevalent among the population also have a rightful place in this volume. Morally instructive, uplifting, and nationalistic elements are likewise considered indispensable. Accordingly, more serious material should be interwoven with character-forming and heartening readings, poems suitable for recitation, historical and everyday scenes; and excerpts from the more elevated works of national and folk literature, in addition to parables, proverbs, aphorisms, and memorable sayings (*Néptanítók Lapja* 1868, 645–646).

The draft adheres to a principle of gradual progression: as pupils advance through the year groups, the knowledge-transfer function of the texts assumes an increasingly important role alongside the cultivation of reading skills. In the final two years, the readers are explicitly required to support and facilitate independent learning.

Despite these developments, no clear consensus emerged among experts in the latter half of the century regarding the appropriate proportion of subject-matter content to include in readers. The contemporary pedagogical debate reveals two markedly divergent positions. According to one view, readers should contain a substantial amount of subject-matter material in order to mitigate the instructional difficulties associated with the undivided elementary school outlined above. Publications aligned with this position often bore titles such as “reader and textbook” or “science reader”. The opposing view held that scientific knowledge should be conveyed primarily through the teacher’s demonstrations, while readers should consist predominantly of literary texts intended to support moral and national education.¹²

Comparative structural analysis of German and Hungarian elementary school readers

As has been shown, the German model exerted a considerable influence on the development of the reader genre in Hungary. While literal translations predominated in the first half of the nineteenth century, the latter half was marked by the adop-

¹² For the latter view, see the following articles: Kozma, Ferenc (1874): A népiskolai olvasókönyvek. *Néptanítók Lapja*, 7 (22), 357–359.; Radó, Vilmos (1888): Az olvasókönyv legyen-e tankönyv is? *Néptanítók Lapja*, 21 (44), 345–346, *Néptanítók Lapja*, 21 (45), 353–355; Lederer, Ábrahám (1884): Az iskolai olvasókönyvek és a reáltantárgyak. *Néptanítók Lapja*, 17 (80), 727–728; *Néptanítók Lapja*, 17 (81), 735–736; Kiss, Áron (1887): A népiskolai olvasókönyvekről. *Néptanítók Lapja*, 20 (35), 273–275.

tion and adaptation of pedagogical principles and by the reorganisation of the content of readers. It is therefore appropriate to analyse their structural composition through a comparison of German and Hungarian examples, as this allows both the adopted models and the degree of divergence from them to be identified. In this instance, rather than relying on external sources to infer the function of the reader, conclusions regarding its role in the transmission of knowledge, the cultivation of reading and language skills, and the promotion of national and religious education will be drawn directly from its structure.

The study is based on two underlying assumptions. The first, which follows from the phenomena of knowledge transfer and adaptation discussed in earlier chapters, holds that such processes can be identified through demonstrable textual borrowings, but also through the structural organisation of readers and the pedagogical principles underpinning them. The second assumption is that the function of a reader can be inferred from its structural composition. The analysis therefore focuses on the thematic organisation of the reader and the pedagogical principles of its construction.

We approach the reader as a didactic instrument, with the focus of the analysis placed on its macrostructure, in particular, the proportional relationship between the various thematic units it contains. The analytical category system was therefore developed to render the thematic structure of the readers quantifiable. A method of structural analysis, understood as a form of quantitative investigation, was employed because it was deemed appropriate for testing our second assumption: namely that the relative extent of a given content unit allows us to infer the significance attributed to that topic within the instructional function of the reader. The unit of measurement adopted for the structural analysis was a quarter of a page, because measuring the entire textbook made it possible to employ a larger and more practicable scale (e.g., one exceeding line per centimetre). The results are presented as percentages because, unlike absolute values, they facilitate comparison between books of differing length, dimensions, and typographical layout (Dárdai 2002, 66–72).¹³

The sample of thirty elements included in the analysis¹⁴ was selected on the basis of the educational space theory outlined above and the resources available. It is assumed that this corpus is representative of the intertextuality between German and Hungarian readers in circulation during the period, as well as of the structural relationship between them. The sample is also considered suitable for identifying trends characteristic of the reader genre. The 15 Hungarian-language readers included were selected and digitised for analysis at the National Educational Library and Museum. The 15 German-language readers were chosen using the online database of the Leibniz-Institut für Bildungsmedien/Georg-Eckert-Institut.¹⁵ The

¹³ This study does not consider the didactic tools included in the readers, such as textual exercises, questions, illustrations, or diagrams.

¹⁴ A detailed bibliographic description of the reading books is provided in the list of sources at the end of the study.

¹⁵ <http://opac.lbs-braunschweig.gbv.de/DB=6.1/LNG=DU/> [2025.09.24.]

German-language sample represents the wider German-speaking area: 12 were published in Germany¹⁶, two in the hereditary provinces of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and one in Switzerland. All 15 Hungarian-language readers were published in Hungary, 13 of them in Budapest, reflecting the centralisation of Hungarian textbook publishing in contrast to the federal organisation of German school administration and textbook publishing. With regard to textbook series, the analysis focused on volumes intended for the upper grades (grades 5 and 6) of primary education, as certain subjects – geography, history, natural history and physics – were predominantly taught at this level.

The pedagogical principle underpinning the structural composition

In the present study, the structure of reading books is understood as the arrangement and sequence of readings, which can be guided by a number of pedagogical principles. The most common of these is the principle of progressing from the familiar to the unfamiliar. For instance, pupils might first study the local fauna, then the fauna of Europe and subsequently that of other continents. This approach can be traced to the educational theories of Herbart and Ziller, who argued that the natural sciences play an important intellectual and moral role in education. According to their view, when teaching these subjects, “it is advisable to follow the process of concept formation according to a concentrically structured curriculum”. (Demeter 1999, 95) The structure of readers was strongly influenced by the organisation of the curriculum into geographical units in ever-widening circles. This principle is evident in the vast majority of texts (for example, *Homeland – Motherland – The Wide World; Heimat – Vaterland – weite Welt*) and was also fundamental in the planning of reading book series spanning multiple grades.

The seasonal arrangement of the readings similarly offers a natural opportunity for demonstration, connecting the description of natural phenomena to the corresponding seasons and addressing them in their chronological context. This approach, however, is more typical of readers intended for lower year groups. In readers designed for higher grades, the readings are generally organised by subject, by another thematic principle, or according to the “grouping method.” In selecting the most appropriate arrangement, the textbook author invariably considers which structure will most effectively facilitate pupils’ comprehension of the world as represented in the readers from a didactic perspective.

The grouping method warrants clarification within the categorisation of readers. Essentially, subjects such as geography, history, natural history, and physics are not taught in isolation, but as part of an integrated curriculum structured around a Realistic Reader.¹⁷ This curriculum is geography-centred: the textbook is organ-

¹⁶ This category also includes books published prior to the unification of Germany in 1871.

¹⁷ The term Realistic Reader (German: Reallesebuch) denotes a type of school reader intended to provide pupils with practical, observable knowledge of the real world and their immediate environment,

ised so that subject-specific knowledge is progressively assigned to increasingly broad geographical units, ranging from the native land to the homeland, and then to foreign countries. In the treatment of each topic, all relevant subject-specific knowledge is addressed from multiple perspectives, including geographical, ethnographical, ethical, historical, natural historical, physical, and economic perspectives (Bárdossy 1990).

	separated by subject	other thematic arrangement	grouping method	according to sea- sons	without system
in total	27	9	6	2	1
German	13	2	4	2	1
Hungarian	14	7	2	0	0

Table 2: Pedagogical principles underpinning the structuring of the reader

Table 2 shows that the most common principle in the compilation of reading books for upper grades is organisation by subject. This aligns with curriculum requirements, which place greater emphasis on teaching specialised subjects in grades 5 and 6, a focus explicitly supported by the reader, as indicated by the expectations set by the Eötvös Textbook Committee.

Subject-based blocks were frequently supplemented by additional thematic sections, the composition of which varied according to the author. For instance, Heinrich's reader includes chapters such as Family Life, School and Church Life, The City and City Life, and The Village and Village Life, encompassing material drawn from multiple subjects. Similarly, Gööz's reader integrates history and geography within chapters entitled Drawings from the Life of the Hungarian People and Pictures of the Capital City.

Similarly, the grouping method often appears as a supplement to the subject-based arrangement. Solereder was the only author to employ it independently in his Bavarian reader, in which the readings were organized by geographical units: readings describing a particular region are followed by historical and natural science texts: The Lech River, Augsburg, The Battle Against the Hungarians on the Lech Field; Helgoland, Storm on the North Sea, The Hanseatic League; The Jordan River and the Dead Sea, Jerusalem, The Camel. In Imre Schultz's *Realistic Reader*, the section entitled The Native Land and the Homeland. Austria is followed by Europe and the Lands and Products of Other Continents, both of which combine geographical, natural history, literary, and religious readings.

At this level, seasonal organisation persisted in only two German readers, serving merely as a supplement to subject-based organisation. Overall, it can be concluded that the most frequently employed pedagogical principle in the compilation of readers is organisation by subject, often combined with other approaches, such as thematic structuring or the grouping method.

thereby moving beyond purely abstract, religious, or literary content.

The category system for the structural analysis

For the structural analysis of the readers, it was necessary to establish categories of readings that would allow each text to be assigned to one – and only one – category. In developing these categories, the tables of contents of the readers, the subject divisions of the public school curriculum of 1869 and their associated content, as well as the topics addressed in the textbooks for each subject, were examined. The texts were classified into three main categories: subject-specific readings, which conveyed knowledge related to a particular school subject; secular literary readings, which presented general moral content; and religious literary readings, which included texts of a religious character.

The category of subject-specific readings comprised seven subcategories:

- Geography: This includes descriptions of geographical phenomena, landscapes, cities and the peoples associated with them.
- History: Alongside historical narratives, this category encompasses cultural history, biographies and constitutional law.
- Natural History: In this period, natural history was organised according to the three traditional kingdoms: mineral, plant, and animal.
- Physics: This subcategory covers physical and chemical phenomena.
- Health: Topics include descriptions of the human body, maintenance of health, and nutrition.
- Economics: This consists of material relating to agricultural and industrial knowledge, together with introductory explanations of the relevant natural-scientific phenomena.
- Grammar: This includes discussion of grammar and spelling.

The thematic organisation of the readers

The thematic organisation of the readers is examined primarily on the basis of the proportion of the three main categories of texts: subject-specific readings, secular literary readings, and religious literary readings. From these proportions, it is possible to infer the relative importance of textbooks in imparting knowledge, practising reading, and conveying moral values. Diagram 1 presents the results of our measurements; only the texts themselves were measured, while accompanying illustrations, figures or exercises were not taken into account.

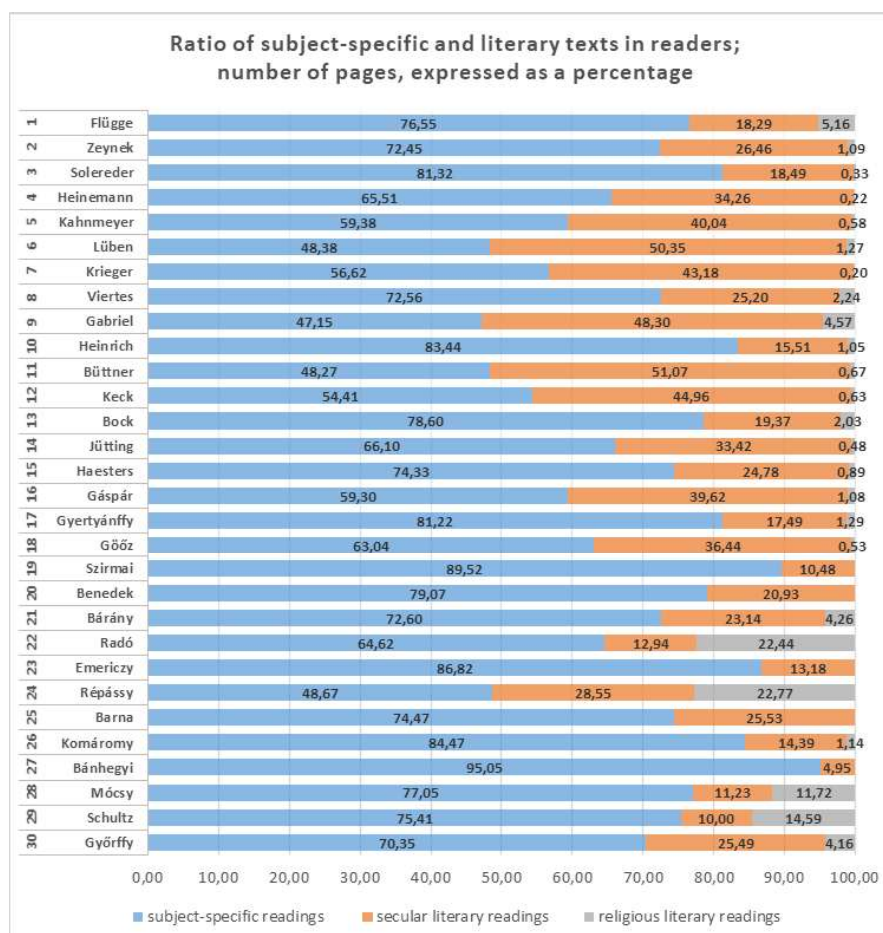


Diagram 1. Proportion of subject-specific and literary readings in the readers; expressed as a percentage of total pages. (Items 1 – 15: German-language readers, items 16–30: Hungarian-language readers.)

Two categories – subject-specific readings and secular literary readings – appear to varying degrees in all works, while religious literary readings are absent in four cases, all of which are Hungarian publications. The proportions of the three categories exhibit considerable variation. Subject-specific readings range from 48.38% to 95.05%, while literary readings account for between 4.95% and 51.07%. For religious literary readings, the proportions range from 0 to 22.77%. This diversity may be attributed to differences in the pedagogical requirements of particular educational spaces and school maintainers. In cases where subject-specific texts constitute a larger proportion, reading books was assigned a more prominent role in knowledge transfer.

Table 3 presents the average values, which indicate that subject-specific reading materials constitute 70.22% of the total corpus across the sample. Among the

literary texts, secular readings account for 26.6%, while religious readings represent only 3.51%. However, significant differences emerge when Hungarian and German readers are compared. Subject-specific readings comprise 74.78% of the material of Hungarian readers – approximately 9% higher than in their German counterparts. The proportion of religious literary readings is likewise 4.17% higher. By contrast, secular literary readings account for one-third of the main text in German readers, a share that exceeds that of Hungarian readers by 13.3%.

	subject-specific readings	secular literary readings	religious literary readings
German readers	65,67	32,91	1,43
Hungarian readers	74,78	19,61	5,60
the whole sample	70,22	26,26	3,51

Table 3. Average values of thematic structure in German and Hungarian readers, expressed as a percentage of total pages

The predominance of subject-specific readings in both Hungarian and German readers indicates that, alongside the cultivation of reading skills, the most important function of these books was the transmission of subject-specific knowledge. It can also be inferred that this function was more pronounced in Hungarian readers.

Although the overall trends are clear, Chart 1 also reveals significant variation between individual works. Among the German authors, the proportion of subject-specific readings falls below 50% in the readers by Lüben, Gabriel, and Büttner. Among the Hungarian authors, only Répássy's work exhibits a similarly low proportion; notably, Répássy prepared his book specifically for urban Catholic girls' schools. The highest proportion of religious readings is likewise found in the Hungarian corpus. This may be attributed to the fact that the readers by Mócsy, Répássy, Bárány, and Schultz were written for Catholic schools, whereas Radó's was produced for Jewish schools. For the remaining readers, with the exception of the Swiss *Viertes illustriertes Lesebuch*, the denominational affiliation of the target audience was not specified.

On this basis, it can be hypothesised that the characteristics of Hungary's multi-maintainer school system are likewise reflected in the structure of reading books. In our opinion, the significant differences evident across the diagram's entries reveal the diverse pedagogical approaches adopted by school maintainers and textbook authors, thereby indicating the existence of both literature-based and subject-based types of reading books.

If the thematic structure of the reader shows considerable variation across the three major categories, this diversity is even more evident within the subcategories of subject-specific reading material, as illustrated in Diagram 2. The categories of geography, history, and natural history appear in every reader and constitute the largest proportion of content; in most cases, each exceeds 10%. By contrast, the proportions allocated to physics, health education, economics, and grammar generally remain below 10%, and these categories do not appear in all readers.

Physics is absent from 3 readers, health education from 7, economics from 11, and grammar from 22. These omissions likewise allow us to infer the degree of importance attributed to these topics by the authors, as well as the pedagogical needs of the particular educational space.

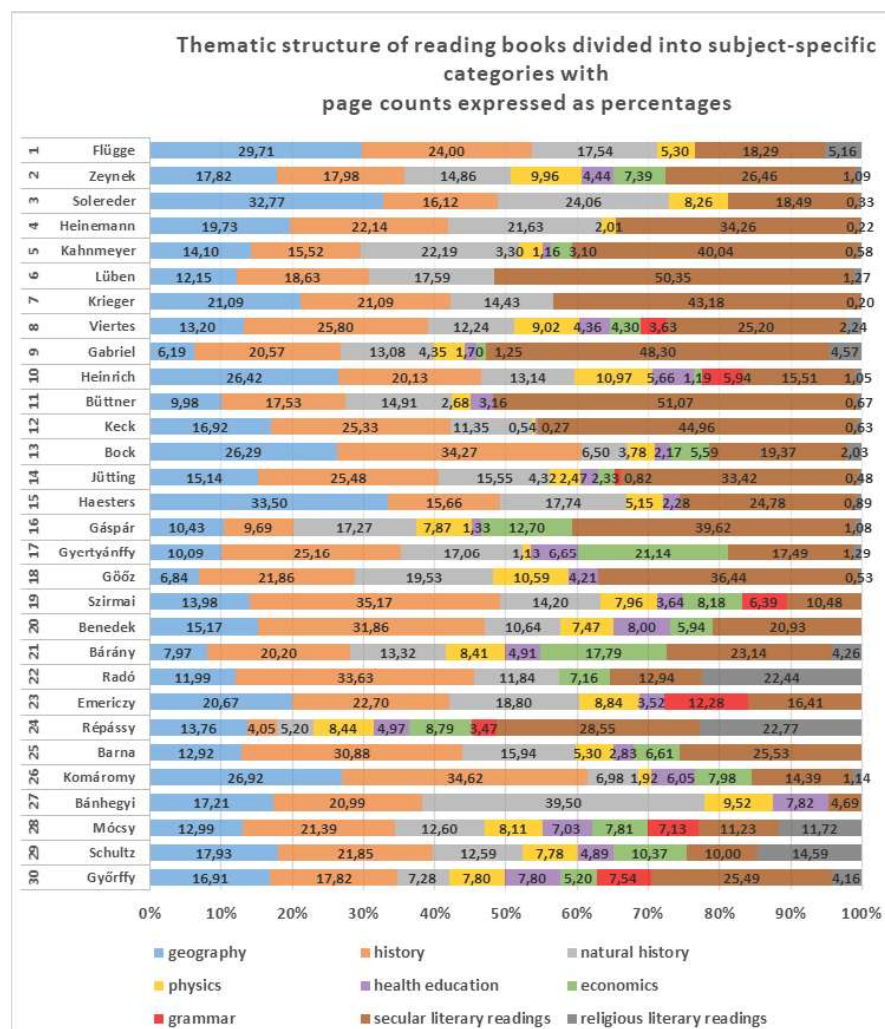


Diagram 2. Thematic structure of reading books divided into subject-specific categories, with page counts expressed as percentages. (Items 1–15: German-language, items 16–30: Hungarian-language reading books.)

A broader picture of the focus of reading materials emerges when the proportions of subject-specific texts within the overall sample are examined (see Table 4). History-related texts form the largest share, accounting for 22.4% of all subject-specific readings. They are followed by geography (17.03%) and natural history (15.32%).

The remaining categories play a more modest role: natural sciences (5.69%), economics (4.83%), health education (3.38%) and, lastly, grammar (1.57%).

	German	Hungarian	the whole sample
Natural science content	43,62	48,86	46,25
geography	19,67	14,38	17,03
natural history	15,79	14,85	15,32
physics	4,64	6,74	5,69
health education	1,84	4,91	3,38
economics	1,68	7,98	4,83
Human content	56,38	51,33	53,85
history	21,35	23,46	22,4
grammar	0,69	2,45	1,57
secular literary readings	32,91	19,82	26,37
religious literary readings	1,43	5,60	3,51

Table 4. Average values for subject-specific texts in German and Hungarian readers, with page numbers expressed as percentages

In Table 4, subjects are grouped according to the contemporary distinction between the natural and human sciences, allowing conclusions to be drawn regarding the role of readers in the transmission of scientific knowledge. Based on the aggregated values, science-related content accounts for 46.25% of the total, while content related to the humanities constitutes 53.85%. Given that nearly half of the texts convey scientific material, it can be inferred that this feature was fundamental to defining the genre of readers in German- and Hungarian-speaking areas during the second half of the nineteenth century. The individual characteristics of each reader can be interpreted in relation to their deviation from this overall pattern.

The table further highlights differences between readers from the two language areas. Within the natural sciences categories, geography and natural history occupy a larger proportion in German readers, while physics, health education, and economics are more prominent in Hungarian books. Overall, natural science content constitutes 48.86% of Hungarian readers, 5.24% higher than in German works. Conversely, humanities content is 5.05% higher in German books, with literary texts featuring more prominently. Historical and grammatical texts are 2% more prevalent in Hungarian readers, while religious texts account for 4% more.

The data demonstrate that Hungarian-language readers made a more significant contribution to the dissemination of scientific knowledge. Several factors may account for this phenomenon. For instance, in the single-teacher, undivided elementary schools that predominated in Hungary, there was less opportunity for independent instruction in individual subjects, and students may not have had access

to textbooks other than the reader. This observation supports the hypothesis that the knowledge-transfer function of the reader was particularly important. It is also plausible to suggest that the relatively high proportion of health and economics readings in Hungarian readers reflects an intention to address the comparatively underdeveloped health and economic conditions of the time.

Conclusion

In the initial phase of this study, the historical context of education was outlined, and it was argued that the introduction of natural science knowledge into readers can be traced to the contributions of German philanthropic pedagogy. It was further contended that the reception of German reader literature exerted the most significant influence on the development of Hungarian readers in the nineteenth century. Subsequently, the emergence of natural science knowledge in Hungarian elementary education was traced in broad terms through the relevant laws, regulations, and curricula. However, the practical implementations of these provisions were largely determined by the school maintainer and by whether the institution was divided or undivided. The divergent perspectives on the knowledge-transfer function of readers can likewise be linked to these contextual factors.

The results of the analysis of the common pedagogical principles underlying the compilation of reading books indicate that the processes of knowledge transfer and the influence of the educational context can be discerned not only in the emergence of pedagogy as a university discipline, the development of school systems, or the professionalisation of teaching, but also in the pedagogical expertise associated with elementary schools and their reading books. Our thematic analysis of the readers demonstrates that readings related to the natural sciences comprised, on average, nearly half of the total content. This finding suggests that the age-appropriate teaching of natural sciences, with slightly varying emphases, constituted one of the fundamental functions of both Hungarian and German-language readers during this period.

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