

## What We Need Is Good Communication: Vernacular Globalization in Some Hungarian Speech

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This study is a cultural interpretivist investigation of the system of meanings that shapes the use of the term “communication” (*kommunikáció*) in Hungarian citizens’ assessments of political communication. Using a combination of the diary-interview method and semantic analysis of mediated texts, I find that Hungarian citizens distinguish good communication from bad using a set of local standards (veracity, morality, quality, effectiveness, and effects on society). I also find that citizens’ communication ideal and the cultural premises animating that ideal are closely aligned with the tenets of translocal communication culture, and I argue that these meanings serve as evidence of the vernacular globalization of that culture. I also discuss how citizens’ metadiscourse becomes a unique site for the local articulation of translocal meanings.

*Keywords:* globalization, translocality, political discourse, cultural discourse, metadiscourse, media, communication culture

Communication is what people make of it (Carbaugh & Boromisza-Habashi, 2011). This statement captures a cultural interpretivist scholarly approach to the study of communication, an approach primarily invested in studying speakers’ culturally meaningful ways of speaking (Hymes, 1974). When such scholarship turns its attention to globalization, the question arises: Who are the people whose ways of speaking we seek to understand, and in what sense are their ways of speaking theirs?

In this study I am concerned with systems of meaning that some contemporary speakers attribute to “communication as a category of social practice” (Craig, 2008, p. 687) in the context of globalization. Some recent communication research claims the existence of an increasingly global communication culture that comprises a system of meanings speakers scattered around the world attribute to communication and that travels across boundaries separating locally defined communities of speakers. I will refer to these meanings of communication as *translocal* (Alim, 2009). The second interpretation points to local knowledge about communication, specifically in Hungarian citizens’ public discourse about political *kommunikáció* (“communication,” roughly pronounced as *comb-oo-nee-cah-tsee-*

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oh). These meanings, which I will refer to as *local*, are specific to a particular type of speaker within the Hungarian speech community. In this article I show that there is notable alignment between the translocal and local interpretations of communication. This alignment substantiates claims about the existence of communication culture, with some qualifications. Communication culture does not simply overwrite native Hungarian conceptions of communication. Rather, the Hungarian speech I analyze in this study ought to be seen as a historically contingent articulation of communication culture in a particular type of Hungarian speech. Such articulation is best thought of as evidence of vernacular globalization (Appadurai, 1996), the integration of cultural forms disseminated across various regions of the world into local practice.

Ethnographers of communication who locate the meaning of communication in its observable, meaningful conduct (Carbaugh, 1988, 1989, 2005; Katriel, 2004; Philipsen, 1992, 2010; Wilkins, 2005) have demonstrated that speakers rely on metadiscursive practice as a communicative resource for social organization. In making this argument they follow Dell Hymes (1972), whose work offers ethnographers of communication a theoretical and analytic frame for conceiving of language not as an abstract system of signs but as a set of resources used in communicative and social action and for studying “the multiple relations between linguistic means and social meaning” (p. 39). A recent development in the ethnography of communication, cultural discourse theory (Carbaugh, 2005), posits a mutually constitutive relationship between culture and the use of locally available linguistic means. The theory maintains that when speakers use language in recognizable, patterned ways that language use will not only be rendered meaningful by culture, but it will also render cultural meanings relevant, normative, and durable. Culture, in this sense, is made up of speakers’ meaningful use of discursive resources in geographically continuous or dispersed spaces, social groups, or languages at various historical moments. It follows that culture’s boundaries can be drawn around the intelligibility of communication practices that constitute, carry, and sometimes transform culture itself. Culture is thus seen as radically discursive—that is, as immanent in communication and not necessarily restricted to particular geographic locations or social groups. The discourse view prompts the cultural analyst interested in the meanings of communication to begin with the documentation of a coherent system of communication metadiscourse and to continue with the reconstruction of the meanings of that practice to the speakers who enact it and for whom it is enacted. These meanings can be formulated as semantic relationships among symbolic terms and as cultural premises, or “unspoken assumptions drawn from a specific communal system of symbolic resources” (Fitch, 2003, p. 91), that inform those relationships.

Two disclaimers: In studying the meaningful use of *communication*<sup>2</sup> as a discursive resource available to Hungarian citizens, I neither claim nor assume that all speakers in that category use this resource or that citizens who use it do so consistently and in the same way. Discursive resources may be available to speakers, but the simple fact of their availability does not determine how particular speakers will use them in context. The description and interpretation of available resources reveals little about how widespread their use may be, but it does provide evidence that, when used, those resources will be at least recognizable and intelligible. The degree to which a resource is shared is not what makes it cultural (Schiffrin, 1994). I also do not claim that the study will shed new light on Hungarian citizens’ disaffection

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<sup>2</sup> In the research narrative, I use *communication* in italics to signal that I am highlighting the local, Hungarian use of the term.

with the political elite and its typical forms of expression or what such disaffection may have to do with media exposure and use. The complex relationship of media, political communication, and citizens' views of politics has been convincingly documented by political communication scholars studying the Hungarian political context specifically (Sükösd, 1997, 2000), Hungary in relation to other Central Eastern European countries (Tworzecki & Semetko, 2012), and Western societies in general (McNair, 2003). By contrast, this study is concerned with a widely used discursive resource, the term *kommunikáció*, that Hungarian citizens use to evaluate political communication, and with how the meanings of the term active in its invocations serve as evidence of vernacular globalization (Appadurai, 1996), the interaction of translocal and local resources that members of social groups draw on to participate in everyday life in particular places at particular historical moments.

The study is best seen as a new turn in the interdisciplinary conversation between the ethnography of communication and sociolinguistics that began in the 1980s. Katriel and Philipsen's (1981) and Carbaugh's (1988) groundbreaking cultural studies of the form and significance of communication in U.S. discourse showed that, from the perspective of speakers going about their everyday lives, communication had a dual nature. On the one hand, it was talked about as an end in itself, an ideal state of social contact that bridges individual selves and, as such, a chief source of each individual's experience of social existence. In this sense, communication as a locally recognized expressive form had intrinsic value. On the other hand, communication was also discussed as a means to the end of accomplishing the state of being in communication with others and attaining social integration and unity. Communication was recognized as a ritual form that all participants had to perform correctly and that therefore required reflection and effort. In this interpretation, communication was ascribed instrumental value. The view of communication as a means to an end introduced the possibility of both the failure and the evaluation of individual speakers' attempts at communication. This normative dimension of communication prompted U.S. speakers to produce marked forms of communication such as "really communicating" (Carbaugh, 1988, p. 121) to index successful attempts.

The sociolinguist Deborah Cameron (2000, 2004, 2008) drew on these findings to formulate her claims about *communication culture*. The term highlights the deep significance and efficacy that contemporary speakers attribute to human communication. Cameron, who coined the term while studying communication practices and related cultural assumptions in the UK service economy in the mid-1990s, claimed that heightened concern with communication stemmed from two sources: the rise of the service industry in the West, which led to the increasing role of communication in the creation and maintenance of corporate brands, and modernity's preoccupation with crafting, maintaining, and presenting authentic selves using a range of communication skills. She listed four tenets of communication culture:

- A widely shared belief in the importance of communication and a perception that many problems (and their solutions) are linked to it.
- An acceptance that there is a "right way" and a "wrong way" to communicate, and a proliferation of expert discourse about the "skills" required to do it right.
- A growth in specific training in communication, and an increasing desire to assess or evaluate individuals' performance as communicators.

- A tendency to regulate and standardize communication practices within particular institutions. (Cameron, 2004, pp. 66–67)

Later, Craig (2005, 2013) picked up the notion of communication culture and gave it a broader interpretation as a cultural pattern observable in the way speakers talked about various forms of communication. For Craig, communication culture encompassed ways of speaking that advanced

the idea that communication is important, the idea that human problems are caused by bad communication and can be solved by better communication, the idea that communication is a technical skill that can be improved by applying principles and techniques disseminated by communication experts, the idea, in short, that it is “good to talk.” (2005, p. 660)

Both Cameron’s narrower and Craig’s broader interpretation call attention to the dual character of *communication* in communication culture as an end in itself and as a means to an end. Talking is therefore good in the sense that it is a form of expression with instrumental and intrinsic value.

During the past 15 years, the claim that we live in a communication culture has been advanced not only in sociolinguistics and in communication studies (Craig, 2005, 2013; Thurlow, 2001) but also in some neighboring disciplines such as applied linguistics (Kramsch 2005, 2011; Kramsch & Boner, 2010) and education (Edge, 2009). Despite some differences in the use of the term, these authors agreed that, minimally, communication culture consisted of two components: talk about communication, and the meanings, beliefs, and ideas about communication implied in that talk. They also agreed that the global circulation of communication culture was increasing. The international service economy (Cameron, 2000), fast capitalism (Kramsch, 2005), and national and international processes of sociopolitical change (Craig, 2013) all served as vehicles for the increasingly global reach of communication culture. Cameron (2002) added that expertise related to communication skills tends to flow from the center of globalization (Western, Anglophone societies) toward the periphery (non-Western, non-Anglophone societies). In the final section of this article, I offer a critical assessment of this latter view.

In what follows I pursue answers to the question: What system of meanings shapes the use of the term *communication* in Hungarian citizens’ assessments of political communication? How does the use of the term serve as evidence of vernacular globalization? I first discuss the methodological foundations of the study. Next, I share the results of my inquiry into local meanings of *communication*. I end with a discussion of three findings: Hungarian citizens’ evaluative discourse about *communication* (a) expresses a partially coherent local system of standards and a related communication ideal, (b) serves as evidence of the vernacular globalization of communication culture, and (c) captures the translocal meanings of communication more fully than other types of Hungarian speech about political *communication*.

### Method

Globalization is a social scientific concept with an unfortunate property: On its own, it does not point to the range of human actions that constitute it. It does not occur when someone is “globalizing”

(Billig, 2013). Understanding language use in the global context requires research that both attends to how specific communication practices unfold in particular social contexts and is equipped to capture the mark of the local and the global on those practices (Slembrouck, 2010). This approach is anthropological and, as such, makes use of ethnographic methods. The present study of the vernacular globalization of language use demonstrates the utility of such an anthropological approach.

The original impetus for this study was a set of observations I made while conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Hungary during the late 2000s. Listening to everyday conversations among friends, family, and strangers, I noticed that most popular discourse about *kommunikáció* ("communication") tended to express concern with professional politicians'—including the government's, the opposition's, political parties', and individual politicians'—public expression. Additionally, in some ways this popular discourse sounded familiar to my ears trained to hear and interpret the meanings of communication in the U.S. context. A few years after completing my ethnographic research project in Hungary, I decided to follow up on these observations and to capture the cultural logic of Hungarian *communication* in the political context. I modeled my methodological choices on Tamar Katriel and Gerry Philipsen's (1981) now classic ethnographic study of the prominent U.S. cultural category of communication as a recognizable mode of speaking in interpersonal interaction. Their methods are exemplary in that they were designed to capture the significance of communication for speakers who used the term in their everyday interactions to reflect on the nature and quality of communicative conduct.

I collected data from three sources. First, I used the diary-interview method (Zimmerman & Wieder, 1977) with two research participants who each kept a diary of experiences of political *communication* in the mass media. Conceived of to approximate participant observation, this method was particularly useful to me, as I live and work in the United States. I decided to recruit two participants with whom I had an established relationship in order to minimize the face threat involved in discussing contemporary Hungarian political life, a cultural scene that tends to be highly polarizing (Boromisza-Habashi, 2013). Both participants were in their late thirties, had grown up speaking Hungarian, and were residents of Hungary. Neither participant identified as a professional politician. Research participants kept their diaries for seven consecutive days on Google Docs where I could follow their responses to my prompts in real time and could respond to questions about those prompts. I asked them to reflect on what they identified as instances of professional politicians' *kommunikáció* in the daily news cycle by recording the agent, intended audience, content, and context of a given instance of it. I also asked them to record audiences' and their own reactions to all instances. Following Katriel and Philipsen's ethnographic orientation and Carbaugh's (1989) methodology for studying cultural terms for talk, I did not define *communication* for these participants; rather, I let them identify acts of *communication* in the political context on their own. Upon the completion of their diaries, I conducted semistructured open-ended interviews with them on Skype. In line with the diary-interview method, I used the interviews to give participants an opportunity to reflect on the communicative performance of writing their diaries by asking them to elaborate certain points they had made.

The purpose of this first mode of data collection was not to capture the views of a representative sample of the Hungarian population. Rather, I used these rich data as a starting point, to formulate an early set of local interpretations of *communication* along three semantic dimensions, all of which emerged

from the data: veracity, morality, and quality. These early interpretations served as the basis for my initial code book.

I used, and eventually extended, the code book to analyze a second, much more extensive, data corpus. My goal was to collect citizens' assessments of *communication* from a wide range of popular sources. My broad conception of citizens' assessments included any overt, public evaluation of political *communication* attributed to members of the Hungarian political elite by individual speakers who did not identify as professional politicians or members of the political elite. This focus excluded genres of expression presented as the voice of news organizations as opposed to individual speakers, such as editorials and news reports. To collect such assessments, I turned to political blogs and online news outlets. In 2012, at the outset of this research, I reviewed the Golden Blog awards to identify the most widely read and highly rated Hungarian political blogs. I found the following political blogs, which received the award in the news blogs category between 2008 and 2011: [vastagbor.blog.hu](http://vastagbor.blog.hu), [magyarinfo.blog.hu](http://magyarinfo.blog.hu), [torokgaborelemezb.blog.hu](http://torokgaborelemezb.blog.hu), [egyenlito.blog.hu](http://egyenlito.blog.hu), [mandiner.blog.hu](http://mandiner.blog.hu), and [velemenyzvezet.blog.hu](http://velemenyzvezet.blog.hu). Next, I used the page view and visitor counter Alexa to identify the most frequently visited Hungarian news websites ([index.hu](http://index.hu), [origo.hu](http://origo.hu), [hir24.hu](http://hir24.hu), [hirkereso.hu](http://hirkereso.hu), and [nol.hu](http://nol.hu)). Using Google, I performed searches on all of these sites, including main articles and user comment sections, using a combination of the verb *kommunikál* ("communicates") and *kormány* ("government"), *politikus* ("politician"), *ellenzék* ("opposition"), and *párt* ("party") as search terms. I used the third-person singular *kommunikál* to increase the likelihood of finding discourse about actual acts of *communication* that foreground situated action performed by a human agent or agents (Tóth, 2010). After eliminating texts reoccurring in search results, I recorded 277 overt evaluations of *communication* from the first 10 results of each search from each of the 11 sources, including main articles and comment sections. I chose not to include discourse about hypothetical acts of *communication* (i.e., generalized discussions of how politicians or governments could or should *communicate*) in my corpus to maintain analytic focus on assessments of actual or typical acts of *communication*.

Another source of data was a review of Hungarian literature on political communication. I sought out histories and discourse analyses of political communication specifically in the Hungarian context rather than discussions of political communication in general. This decision was motivated by my interest in investigating the emergence and significance of *communication* as a category of political expression in the Hungarian context. I used these data to place semantic analyses into a historical context, which in turn aided me in reflecting on the relationship between local and translocal meanings.

In my qualitative analysis I followed Cameron's (2000) strategy of looking across data sources, and Katriel and Philipsen (1981) in seeking out the semantic properties of political *communication* in Hungary. To this end, I identified patterned relationships between *communication* and related symbolic terms; in particular, relationships of contrast and co-occurrence. Besides leading me to identify the three semantic dimensions of veracity, morality, and quality in speakers' interpretations of *communication*, the analysis also pointed me to three semantic domains in which speakers employed these dimensions: distinguishing good and bad *communication*, commenting on the effectiveness of *communication*, and characterizing the effects of *communication* on society at large. I used these semantic dimensions and domains to capture the meanings of *communication* active in citizens' assessments. Following the

completion of my analyses, I conducted a member check with the interviewee-diarists by sharing my findings and asking for their critical feedback.

In the following section I first set the stage for the findings from the analysis of mediated data by summarizing what I learned from the review of scholarship addressing the history of *communication* in Hungary.

### Historical Context

The concern with political communication is not a recent phenomenon in Hungary. For most of the country's modern history, that concern crystallized around the political elite's interest in exercising control over public expression. The Hungarian state began using the force of criminal law to sanction particular forms of political expression deemed dangerous to the state and social order at the end of the 19th century (Boromisza-Habashi, 2013). In the 20th century, the state socialist dictatorship held government messaging under tight control. The press, seen as the conduit of political communication targeting citizens, was given the function of maintaining order and ingraining the masses with state ideology. The ruling party's concern with maintaining the channels of state propaganda was so great that it upheld its official stance on censorship until the fall of the regime in 1989, even during the time of gradual economic reform in the late 1980s (Hegedűs, 2001). Suspicious of everything reported by the news media, citizens resorted to "reading between the lines" (Szilágyi-Gál, 2005), the interpretive strategy of choice among Hungarians and citizens of other state socialist countries (see Tanasoiu, 2011). Citizens who read between the lines understood that political communication was not to be taken at face value because the most salient aspect of the text was not its propositional content. Political speeches were carefully designed to be devoid of facts, to keep the citizenry in the dark about the affairs of the state, and to cement the social and political status of the speaker. At the receiving end, listeners engaged in often futile attempts to glean any useful information from between the lines about the speaker's intentions or the country's future (Szabó, 1999). When official news outlets debunked a Western news report as deliberate misinformation, for example, citizens quickly concluded that the original report was likely to be not only true but also a thorn in the side of the regime (Hegedűs, 2001). Lack of trust in the political elite and lack of hope for social change were rampant among Hungarian citizens.

*Communication* gained the status of a cultural key term in the discourse of the professional political elite—a discourse informed by international communication and public relations scholarship—after the fall of the state socialist political system in 1989. However, this was not the first time the term appeared in Hungarian usage. As a Latin loanword, it had surfaced in ecclesiastic discourse centuries before, and by the end of the 20th century, it sounded relatively familiar to the Hungarian ear (Tóth, 2010). *Communication* in this traditional sense indexed an end in itself, an ideal state of communion—connection, shared existence—between God and humans or among humans ("Kommunikáció," n.d.). The interpretation of (political) *communication* as a state of connection also featured prominently in the public discourse of the early days of political euphoria after the fall of state socialism. Unfettered *communication*, realized as freedom of expression, was seen as the token of a new era (Hegedűs, 2005) in which it was no longer necessary to read between the lines and the closure of the rift between the political elite and citizens could begin.

In the mid-to-late 1990s, however, as the increasingly polarized political elite began developing a strong interest in Western theories of media elites and media influence (Hegedűs, 2005) and in the global business discourse of public relations and strategic communication (Tóth, 2010; see also Cameron, 2002), the term reappeared in public discourse carrying new and unfamiliar meanings. Hungarian communication scholarship suggested that, in the context of professional politics, public metadiscourse portrayed *communication* as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. *Communication* was suddenly a concern, a problem, and a type of performance subject to evaluation. Political elites became increasingly convinced that *communication* was a powerful tool they could use to sway public opinion. Political parties began hiring Western consultants who would provide the most visible politicians with communication training. Israeli-American communication consultants Ron Werber and Arthur J. Finkelstein became permanent fixtures of Hungarian elections. Fodor and Kitta (2009) announced the emergence of a *kommunikációs paradigma* ("communication paradigm") in Hungarian politics in which governance was reduced to *communication* for the sake of acquiring, securing, and fortifying political power. Szabó and Kiss (2012) noted that within this paradigm, Hungarian "politicians seemed to think that communication . . . was omnipotent" (p. 491).

By the early 2000s, *communication* became firmly established as a topic and a *divatszó* ("fashionable term") in public discourse (Tóth, 2010). The overwhelming majority of citizen commentary on Hungarian political *communication* was negative. Frustration with *communication* led some commenters to bitterly dismiss Hungarian politics as a whole:

A tax increase is sold as a tax decrease, feeble experimentation as a self-assured march forward, wasting savings as saving pensions, and ruining financial services as saving the homeland. . . . It is obvious that we are a communication superpower [*kommunikációs nagyhatalom*], a country of spokespeople and press offices, a nation of wooden language and shameless deceit. (Uj, 2011, paras. 8, 9)

In the following sections I elaborate the local system of meanings active in the data corpus I collected from informants and mediated texts.

### **Communication: The View from Informants**

When my informants discussed *communication* in the context of politics, they referred almost exclusively to national politics. They suggested that the unmarked, basic form of *communication* in political life stood for *tájékoztatás* ("informing"), which carries a dual meaning. *Tájékoztatás* refers to the act of informing the people (*emberek*) through various media channels about the activities and political stances of professional politicians (*politikusok*) and their parties (*pártok*); it also refers to guiding or orienting the people's interpretation of, and reaction to, that information. In addition, for my informants, *communication* as an act of informing and guidance implied a projection of what course the country would take in the future. *Communication* in this basic sense was seen as an accurate representation of "what is going on" (*mi történik*); its accuracy was grounded in politicians' "thoughtful" (*meggondolt*) statements and a media that did not "serve politics" (*kiszolgálják a politikát*) by reporting from perspectives favored by their chosen political "side" (*oldal*). The people evaluated the information they were provided, selected

a preferred future for the country, and voted for politicians or parties whom they knew were moving the country toward that particular future. In sum, my respondents imagined politics as a marketplace of possible futures and *communication* as a free flow of accurate information from responsible politicians that created and served an informed citizenry capable of making responsible choices during elections.

When discussing the reality of Hungarian politics, my informants painted a picture that was a far cry from the free marketplace of futures. Although they were optimistic about Hungary's distant future, they were concerned about the degree to which the people were at the mercy of professional politicians and their political organizations. They explained that Hungarian politicians in a position of power shamelessly pursued their own interests and "smashed" (*szétzúz*) democratic institutions. The people, caught in "a state of complete desperation" (*teljesen el vannak keseredve*) and fear for their jobs and livelihoods, were silently suffering the excesses of the political class. They were secretly hoping that, come the next cycle of parliamentary elections, politicians in government would "calm down" (*lenyugszanak*) and give the people some concessions in order to stay in power. My informants indicated a deep sociopolitical divide between a "brutal" (*brutális*) political elite and a people beaten into submission and concerned only with day-to-day survival. On this antagonistic and morally corrupt political landscape, most professional politicians, parties, and governments *communicated* with the people in the form of "statements" (*nyilatkozat*), "announcements" (*bejelentés*), and "floating new ideas" (*ötlet-felvetés*) to test and sway public opinion to their own advantage. Politicians also used the politically biased media to fight "communication battles" (*kommunikációs csaták*) to secure their own power by discrediting their opponents. However, they did not always succeed in "manipulating" (*manipulál*) the people with their propaganda. More often than not, the people knew when they were "being taken for idiots" (*hülyének nézik őket*).

Despite their general dissatisfaction with *communication* in contemporary Hungarian society, my informants did not deny the existence of valuable forms of *communication*. The primary semantic distinction they employed to characterize actual or typical acts of *kommunikáció* was "communicating well" (*jól kommunikál*) as opposed to "communicating badly" (*rosszul kommunikál*). My initial interpretation of their uses of *communication* was organized around three semantic oppositions. The first of these characterized the veracity of *communication* as a form of representation. Good *communication* was *truthful*, whereas bad *communication* was *misleading*. The second oppositional pair centered on the motive of *communication* as a form of moral action. Here, *communication* was either *ethical* (good communication) or *unethical* (bad communication). Third, *communication* could be evaluated for its quality as an art, or *techné*. Along this semantic dimension, good *communication* was discussed as *artful*, and bad *communication* as *inept*.

### **The Semantic Analysis of Mediated *Communication* Metadiscourse**

A broad look at Hungarian citizens' mediated assessments of *communication* helped me gain a more nuanced sense of *communication* as a locally recognized practice and of its value in the eyes of those to whom political elites address that practice. These assessments, as we will see, are overwhelmingly negative. However, I would like to remind the reader that the meanings articulated here should not be taken as a statistically representative account of Hungarian citizens' opinions of political

*communication*. As in other countries, many Hungarians have great respect for some professional politicians' performance and service to the public. Nevertheless, when Hungarian citizens use *communication* as a discursive resource to evaluate the practice of political communication, they bring into play some range of the meanings outlined earlier. The analytic focus of this article is not on citizens' opinions but on one particular resource they use in a patterned way to express those opinions.

The analysis of mediated text data yielded evidence that my initial analysis of *communication* and its characteristics captured many, although not all, aspects of the meanings immanent in citizen assessments. My analysis confirmed the interpretation of *communication* as a practice targeting the people. Bloggers and their interlocutors portrayed *communication* as situated in a mediated interactional context where the speaker and the audience were distant spatially or temporally. *Communication*, in citizen discourse, followed a cyclical pattern: Political elites *communicated* to shape events, particularly elections; ordinary citizens ("little people") assessed *communication* and acted as individual voters, making individual decisions about which politicians were worthy of their support, resisting politicians who took them for idiots or "children" (*gyerekek*); the politicians they voted into power *communicated*; and so on. Voting took on symbolic meaning as the sole form of appropriate political agency on the part of the people. Despite the people's suspicion and criticism, the practice of *communication* functioned as the only available channel of information transfer between politicians and the people. Unfortunately, most citizens held that the information arriving through this channel could not be trusted, as it did not take the people closer to the "truth" (*igazság*).

The analysis of textual data confirmed the relevance of the semantic dimensions my informants used to interpret *communication* and to distinguish good *communication* from bad. Next, I illustrate the semantic properties of *communication* metadiscourse with excerpts that clearly and concisely show the invocation of particular meanings and do not require the detailed explication of references to Hungarian politics and society. The following three excerpts illustrate how speakers assessed bad *communication* using the dimensions of veracity (misleading), morality (unethical), and quality (inept), respectively.

The bottom line is that it is pointless for [conservative political party] Fidesz to communicate that, as a country, we pose no financial risk and that economic actors see the country's [financial] situation in a positive light. The indicators listed don't support this. [Összességében tehát hiába kommunikálja a Fidesz, hogy nem vagyunk kockázatosak, és a piaci szereplők pozitívnak látják az ország helyzetét, a felsorolt mutatók nem ezt támasztják alá.] (madware666, 2011, para. 7)

Well, THIS is the biggest communication trick that left-wing liberal band of robbers has been using for the past 20 years: instead of denying that they steal and deceive they claim that the other side [conservatives] is doing exactly the same. [Na, EZ a ballib rablóbanda legnagyobb kommunikációs trükkje, amit 20 éve nyom: nem tagadják, hogy ők lopnak, csálnak - de állítják, hogy a másik oldal pontosan ugyan ilyen.] (Panko, 2011, para. 2)

I can't really judge [the Secretary of State for Education's] professional performance, but her communication was simply awful. Even if she had had solid ideas she was not able to express them in an understandable/acceptable manner. [*Nem nagyon tudom megítélni a szakmai munkásságát, de a kommunikációja az egyszerűen borzalmas volt. Ha voltak is értelmes ötletei, akkor sem volt azt képes érthető/elfogadható módon közölni.*] (we, 2011, para. 1)

In addition to the domain of good versus bad *communication*, my analysis revealed another domain in which citizens used the three semantic dimensions to evaluate *communication's* effects on Hungarian society in general. In the following excerpt, the commenter assumes the persona of the conservative Fidesz party to criticize the "odd communication" (*fura kommunikáció*) the party exhibited when, after forming a government, they supported state funding for unprofitable railroad lines, a measure they had previously vehemently opposed.

1. I was a rotten shitfaced demagogue when I instigated nationwide outrage against the closure of unutilized, taxpayer-money-wasting, exorbitantly expensive railroad lines.
  2. I admit that, in doing so, I disadvantaged the nation by acting in the service of my own purely political interests instead of the country's interests.
  3. I was not at all discouraged by the fact that I was not only harming and lying to the country but also swindling my followers with lower-than-average IQs.
- [1. *Egy utolsó rohadt demagóg szar voltam amikor tők kihasználatlan, közpénzpazarló, méregdrága értelmetlen vasúti szárnyvonalak bezárása ellen hiszterizáltam az egész országot.*
2. *Elismerem, hogy amikor ezt tettem, nem az ország, hanem csakis a saját vegytiszta pártpolitikai érdekeimet tartottam szem előtt, a haza kárára.*
3. *Ebben még az sem zavart, hogy nem csupán az országnak ártok és hazudok, de egyben szanaszét hülyítem az átlagos IQ alatti híveimet.*] (sárkányfő, 2012, para. 2)

This commenter suggested that political elites' self-serving, and therefore unethical, *communication* can cause actual "disadvantage" (*kár*) and "harm" (*ártalom*) to the country. Another commenter condemned "divisive" and "primitive" *communication* that bred "fanaticism" (*megosztó és fanatizáló vérprosztó kommunikáció*) (Squid, 2011). Commenters saw harmful *communication* not as a series of isolated incidents but as a widespread pattern or, indeed, an "endemic disease" (*népbetegség*). At the end of a lengthy discussion of Hungarian politicians' belief in the magical power of *communication* to sway public opinion, a commenter wrote, "But why am I ranting here about politics and [former Prime Minister] Gyurcsány: today, communication is an endemic disease in Hungary . . ." ("De hát mit fikázom itt a politikát, meg a Gyurcsányt: a kommunikáció ma Magyarországon népbetegség . . .") (Doktor Kottász, 2011, para. 5)

Citizens used the three semantic dimensions to formulate assessments in a third domain as well. They reflected on the "effectiveness" (*hatékonyság*) of acts of *communication*—that is, whether the speaker was able to use *communication* for desired effect, particularly to shape public reactions to what

was being *communicated* and voting decisions. In this sense, *communication* sometimes “worked” (*működik*), and sometimes it did not. Consider the following comment on an example of *communication* that the commenter considered a “lie” (*hazugság*):

They promise something and then do the opposite. They even explain that they never made that promise and that they know better what I want [than I do] anyway.

I am not digging this style. It might work with 8 million other citizens, as this is what the average citizen wants. I would like something different.

[*Ígérnek valamit, majd az ellenkezőjét tesszik és még meg is magyarázzák, hogy ők ilyet nem is mondtak, meg egyébként is, ők jobban tudják, mit szeretnék.*

*Ez a stílus nálam nem nyerő. Másik 8 millió magyar állampolgárnál lehet, működik, ezt kívánja az átlag. Én nem ezt szeretném.] (Joebacsi70, 2011, para. 4)*

Here, the commenter used the semantic dimension of veracity to question the degree to which a lie can be effective in winning over voters. Evaluations of the effectiveness of political *communication* and its effects on Hungarian society did not fit neatly into the good–bad domain, particularly because such evaluations shifted emphasis from the characteristics of acts of *communication* to their observable consequences for the country and its citizens.

In the relatively few cases where *communication* was evaluated negatively in one or more dimensions and positively in another, the overall evaluation was negative. Evaluations that invoked more than one semantic domain were overwhelmingly negative (95%). The picture becomes more complicated, or indeed disjointed, when we look at evaluations in and across particular semantic domains. When an assessment referenced more than one domain, evaluation in one domain did not indicate patterned relationships with evaluations in others. Evaluations of the effectiveness of an act of *communication* did not indicate a positive effect on society, and its lack of effectiveness did not indicate a negative effect. The evaluation of the veracity, motive, or quality of an act of *communication* did not indicate effectiveness; neither did the goodness or badness of *communication* reveal the nature of its effect on society. In sum, within the system of standards Hungarian citizens used to evaluate *communication*, I could not identify patterned relationships between and across various semantic domains. Rather, the domains appeared to be parallel semantic options available to citizens who felt compelled to assess political *communication*. Thus, the system of standards citizens used in their assessments was only partially coherent: Individual standards were meaningful by their association with semantic domains and dimensions, but the relationships among standards remained unclear.

Despite the partially coherent system of standards, it is possible to analytically reconstruct an ideal form of communication from the data. Although evaluations across domains were overwhelmingly negative, Hungarian citizens did not dismiss political communication as a worthless form of expression. Consider, for example, the following excerpt in which a commenter criticizes the government for manipulating public opinion by oversimplifying complex issues and misrepresenting the opposition’s position on those issues:

The problem is not that the government is communicating.

The problem is that the government wants to create the impression that they are communicating.

The problem is that the way they raise issues is not only childish but also idiotically simplistic.

[*A baj nem azzal van, hogy a kormány kommunikál.*

*A baj azzal van, hogy a kormány azt a látszatot akarja kelteni, hogy kommunikál.*

*A baj azzal van, hogy a kérdések feltevése részben nemcsak infantilis hanem egyenest debil módra egyszerűsít.*] (aladi1, 2012, para. 1)

This excerpt highlights two aspects of Hungarian citizens' discourse about *communication*. First, the contrast between nonproblematic *communication* and the pretense of *communication* suggests that *communication* has a pure and a corrupted form. We catch a glimpse here of a vision of unobstructed, undistorted *communication* that expresses and supports the coexistence of an equally well-informed political elite and citizenry. This positive, redeeming view of *communication* stands in stark contrast with the view of political *communication* as a disease.

Second, because of the contrasting sets of meanings in each of the semantic domains, every assessment of *communication*, negative or positive, gestures toward an ideal form of communication. *Communication* as an ideal form of political expression is truthful, ethical, and artful; it is good for society because it creates a sense of reality that citizens and the political elite share, fosters social and political unity as opposed to division, and serves the interest of the country as a whole; and it is effective in marshaling citizen support for the country's political leadership.

The analysis of the relationship between semantic dimensions and domains reminds us that this ideal does not translate into a coherent system of standards applicable across various acts of *communication*. Truthful political *communication* is not always artful, artful *communication* is not always good for society, and *communication* designed to foster unity is not always effective. Nevertheless, the reconstruction of this ideal from the assessments leads us to identify a set of fundamental assumptions that bring coherence to those assessments. This is the final analytic move toward answering my first research question (What cultural premises shape the use of the term *communication* in Hungarian citizens' assessments of political communication?).

As any patterned form of expression, citizen assessments of political communication serve as vehicles of significant metasocial commentary (Carbaugh, 2005) about the nature of communication and the nature of social relations. Based on the analytic reconstruction of semantic dimensions, domains, and the ideal form of communication they imply, relevant cultural premises about communication and social relations can be formulated as follows: *Communication* matters because it shapes and serves as the expression of political relations in societies. It is not only possible but important to distinguish right and wrong ways of *communicating* and to evaluate ongoing *communication* between the people and political elites using the standards that allow one to make that distinction. Wrong ways of *communicating* hurt sociopolitical relations in society. *Communicating* in the right way is preferred because it can prevent such damage and because it opens up the possibility of improving sociopolitical relations in society. Note that these premises are not cultural in the sense that they are unique to Hungary. Rather, they are cultural in

a discursive sense: They constitute a set of meanings that citizens formulating assessments of political communication take for granted.

### **The Vernacular Globalization of Communication as a Category of Social Practice**

The analysis reported here yields three findings. First, by identifying a set of semantic oppositions, I was able to reconstruct a partially coherent system of standards that Hungarian citizens used to assess political communication, and an ideal form of communication those standards implied. Citizens distinguished good and bad *communication* by evaluating communicative action along the semantic dimensions of veracity, morality, and quality, and they reflected on its effectiveness and its effects on society using the same dimensions. However, the invocation of these standards varied considerably across speakers, and the system of standards they invoked was only partially coherent. Nevertheless, citizens' metadiscourse expressed a deep dissatisfaction with political communication. Future studies may explore the flipside of such dissatisfaction: how discourse about communication expresses a desire, and a blueprint, for social change (Craig, 2013).

Second, there is significant alignment between premises guiding Hungarian citizen assessments and the translocal meanings immanent in communication culture (Cameron, 2000, 2004; Craig, 2005). Such alignment serves as evidence of the vernacular globalization of communication culture. From citizens' perspective, *communication* as a form of expression has the potential to socially integrate the political elite and the citizenry. *Communication* (a) is seen as action performed in a right or wrong way, (b) contributes to social problems when done badly and to solutions to those problems when done right, and (c) is corrigible with reference to locally relevant standards. In addition, as an ideal or end in itself, *communication* implies an ideal polity concerned with the future of the country rather than the interests of individual political actors or groups. Political elites and citizens who exist in a social union created by *communication* are equal partners and collaborators in creating a shared future. Some elements of communication culture, such as the assignment of significance to communication skills, the emphasis on communication training, and the imperative of regulation and standardization, do not have a strong presence in Hungarian citizen assessments. Presumably, these considerations are less relevant to the political context than to the context of the service economy (Cameron, 2000).

Hungarian *communication* metadiscourse aligns with communication culture in another sense as well. Cameron's (2004) study of communication culture in the British health and social care context and the present study both indicate that, despite the strong presence of an ideal and a set of related standards in communication metadiscourse, a fully coherent system of standards is not evident. Future investigations of the relationship between local meanings of communication and communication culture can provide an explanation of whether this partial coherence is an inherent feature of communication culture or a mark of an emergent cultural form (Williams, 1977) that is currently being encoded (Katriel, 2015) and has yet to attain full coherence.

Third, once we place citizen metadiscourse into a historical context, we learn that the translocal meanings that constitute communication culture are more fully expressed in citizen metadiscourse than in other types of Hungarian speech about *communication*. Citizens' dismissal of actual instances of political

communication celebrated the instrumental and the intrinsic value of communication. By contrast, ecclesiastic metadiscourse highlighted communication's intrinsic value, and the metadiscourse of political consultants and professional politicians foregrounded its instrumental value. This observation supports recent critiques of the theory of cultural flows as a process of cultural (including communicative) forms flowing, in an uninterrupted stream, from a center toward a periphery where they overwrite and erase indigenous meanings and practices (Blommaert, 2010; Pennycook & Mitchell, 2008; Rockefeller, 2011). The globalization of communicative forms such as talk about communication is best imagined "as a checkered, layered complex of processes evolving simultaneously at a variety of scales and in reference to a variety of centers [of authority]" (Blommaert, 2010, p. 20). Thus, studying global communication culture as the dissemination of a system of meanings involves anticipating that this culture will find fuller expression in particular types of speech in particular populations within a society at particular historical periods. Future research can do more to explain how translocal communication culture articulates with local ways of speaking at various scales and in various historical, social, and discursive contexts.

Showing the presence of communication culture in some local ways of speaking is not the same as documenting how translocal meanings found their ways into local practices and how they combined with the meanings of those practices. The present study raises some additional questions for future inquiry into the globalization of communication culture. First, are some types of speech (e.g., assessments of observable communication) more likely to serve as vehicles of the translocal meanings of communication than others? Second, when a particular type of local speech expresses communication culture, how local is what cultural analysis identifies as local? Only comparative research can reveal, for example, the degree to which the evaluative standards immanent in evaluative citizen metadiscourse can be considered culturally unique. Finally, how do meanings that constitute communication culture travel not only between communities of speakers around the globe but across historical periods? Reflection on communication and its shortcomings is certainly not a new phenomenon. In *Phaedrus*, Plato expressed concern with the discrepancy between ideal and substandard forms of communication and the desire for communication that built and maintained ideal social relations (Peters, 1999). The investigation of various facets of communication culture, such as its history, features, presence in local ways of speaking, and global dissemination, can help us grasp a system of meanings, concerns, and desires recognized and cultivated by populations across time and space, a system shared by a large number of peoples at the global scale. We may find that communication culture already serves as a global vernacular, as a backdrop of similarity against which members of diverse speech communities make something of communication—that is, recognize and negotiate culturally diverse conceptions of meaningful communicative conduct.

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