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Communal Dilemmas in the Context of Democratic Interventions into Public Discourse

In my talk I will focus on Hungarian public discussions of contemporary freedom of expression debates, and on speakers' use of the metadiscursive term "dilemma" to characterize those debates. I approach these moments of talk from the perspective of two complementary types of analysis. I follow Tracy (2002) in distinguishing a rhetorical and cultural analysis of language use – a distinction that calls for reading within and across sequences of interaction (Sanders, 1999). In the rhetorical mode, analysis focuses on the strategic use of language for the purpose of realizing situated communicative acts. In the Hungarian data, the term "dilemma" tends to be invoked in interactional situations where an intervention into public discourse against hate speech is proposed, and the proposal must be justified against the background of competing proposals. The justification inevitably places the speaker into a social category that stands in opposition to others. Cultural discourse analysis, a branch of the ethnography of communication (Carbaugh, 2007; Scollo 2011), is interested in the local meaning of focal discursive units. In the cultural analysis of locally relevant "dilemmas" I rely heavily on my ethnographic study of the uses of the term "hate speech" in Hungarian public discourse, especially the cultural paradoxes informing parliamentary deliberations with regard to whether or not hate speech should be made subject to criminal law (Boromisza-Habashi, 2007).

One argument I work toward is that framing the legal debate as a "dilemma" provides important insight into how speakers make moral sense of intervention into political discourse with the aim of eradicating "hate speech," understood locally as derogatory talk targeting historically disadvantaged Hungarian minorities. Morally informed sense-making is informed by a larger socio-cultural context: the Hungarian political elite's inability to reconcile the ideal of freedom of speech with specific enactments of free speech. Second, recognizing the possibility of crossing the boundary separating practical and intellectual metadiscourse (Craig, 1999), I develop the term "dilemma" into a theoretical concept ("communal dilemma") that points to culturally specific configurations of meanings and beliefs suggesting two courses of community-wide action that the community as a whole sees as mutually exclusive and equally unsatisfactory. "Communal dilemmas" stand in contrast with dilemmas widely discussed in the discourse analytic literature: dilemmas individuals experience in moments of negotiating contradictions in their system of values and beliefs (Billig et al., 1988; Carbaugh, 1988; Fitch, 1998), when they face a difficult choice between socially consequential communicative acts or strategies (Tracy, 1997, 2010 Ch 3; Tracy & Ashcraft, 2001), or when they feel that they cannot satisfactorily match their ideals to their communicative practices (e.g., Aakhus, 2001; Guttman, 2007).

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