

SÁRA MAGYARI – GIZELA HORVÁTH
Partium Christian University, Oradea

#METOO – HUNGARIAN STYLE

Abstract

This study focuses on the Hungarian impact of the 2017 “Me Too” movement, offering an analysis of some relevant online texts and of their comments. The theoretical framework is provided by the anthropological linguistic approach (Balázs 2009), linguistic world view research (Kövecses 2017, Banczerowski 2008, 2012, Magyari 2015), and discourse analysis (Berger 1998, Nemesi 2016). The research method is based on participant observation and on text analysis, which also offers the possibility of content analysis, if the researcher applies a corpus-centred perspective (Balaskó 2005). The research questions point in two directions. The linguistic approach deals with the question of how the “Me Too” movement is discussed. How do the victim and the offender appear in online media, and how is their image represented by commenting readers? According to our hypothesis, information is not always controlled in online space, and opinion formation becomes almost even more important than the fact itself. Hence, the knowledge fixed within language and language use changes as well. Our research attaches great importance to the reconstruction of linguistic images, leading to the exploration of underlying values systems, also pointing out cultural phenomena such as the dichotomy between silence and speaking out, conceptualized as social phenomena in an anthropological and ethnographic framework. At the same time, from the perspective of argumentation and rhetoric, we are interested in the emerging positions and in the typical arguments supporting these, in their conflict, and in the most frequently occurring means of persuasion. We also presuppose that the positions and modes of reasoning are clearer and relatively restrained in the online press, while the discourse of the comments is more emotionally charged.

KEYWORDS: *#MeToo, online media, linguistic image, argumentation, online comments*

Introduction

As the authors of this paper, we are interested in the attitude of online journalists and commenting readers toward Hungarian cases of the #MeToo phenomenon. What kind of value choices can be identified behind the published articles and the readers' comments?

Although, after the Harvey Weinstein scandal, the entire Western world was flooded with reports of sexual harassment, their number was relatively low within the Hungarian communities and only one case received wider and more enduring publicity. Our research concentrates on this particular case, of an actress (A) who accused an acclaimed theatre director (D) of sexual harassment. The harassment case will be referred to hereinafter as "A-D".

In our processing of this corpus, we (a) analysed the data from an argumentative and rhetorical perspective, focusing on the attitudes expressed in the comments, and (b) used a linguistic approach, i.e. researched the linguistic world view expressed by the news articles published in the online media.

(a) The argumentative and the rhetorical approach

Argumentative and rhetorical perspectives were analysed only based on the comments, since the separate and opposed points of view were expressed most clearly not in the (supposedly) objective reports of the journalists, but in the dynamics of the comments reflecting the readers' opinions.

The scholarly literature relevant to the analysis of the comments was relatively scarce. Thus, we had to develop our own methodology. Our considerations were in many respects similar to those of a workgroup whose members surveyed Hungarian language online portals with respect to the issue of migration in 2015 (Balog E. et al. 2017). We also used the ranking of alexa.com for choosing the online portals, attempting to produce a balanced overall picture, and employed the methods of categorisation and type formation. The data was processed manually and not through software.

One of the first issues to be investigated concerns the list of the online journals to be examined and the establishing of the period under consideration. Since Hungarian society as a whole, and thus also the Hungarian media is strongly polarized, we attempted to include in our sample both pro-government and opposition media outlets. Our investigation targeted the most visited websites. However, since the top 7 of the 50-item list of alexa.com included 2 neutral (Blikk, NLCAfe), 1 pro-government (Origo) and 4 opposition news portals (Index, 444, HVG, 24), we added 3 widely-known pro-government websites to our sample (Magyar Idők, 888, Pesti Srácok).

Online Journal	www.alexa.com 01.03.2018 (all sites)	https://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/HU (journals)	Political affinity	No. of articles	No. of comments
index.hu	5 th in Hungary	1.	opposition	20	no comments
24.hu	11 th in Hungary	2.	opposition	22	524
origo.hu	9 th in Hungary	3.	pro-government	21	no comments
444.hu	15 th in Hungary	4.	opposition	13	6238
hvg.hu	17 th in Hungary	5.	opposition	34	3614
nlcafe	22 th in Hungary	6.	neutral	25	601
blikk.hu	27 th in Hungary	7.	neutral	27	420
magyaridok.hu	155 th in Hungary	-	pro-government	3	no comments
888.hu	171 th in Hungary	-	pro-government	3	1304
pestisracok.hu	291 th in Hungary	-	pro-government	4	136
10 journals				173	12837

We examined the articles most tightly linked to the case. The determination of the time interval proved to be almost self-evident. The first media reports about the case were published on 14 October 2017, and the last significant news article was published on 11 November 2017. Hence, we analysed this one-month period, examining a total of 173 articles and the readers' comments to them.

The latter endeavour, i.e. the analysis of the comments, proved to be a brave, if not foolhardy initiative. We wanted to analyse not only the perspectives of the journalists, but also the readers' opinions, in order to gain an overview of the general dynamics of values, views, and attitudes. However, the analysis of the comments proved to be much more complicated than expected. The question arose whether we should examine only the comments on the news sites or also the comments on their Facebook pages – especially since many sites (Index, Origo, Magyar Idők) had no comments section. Finally, we opted for restricting our analysis of the comments to the news portals. On the one hand, since it is a more stable corpus than that of the Facebook comments (which can be deleted anytime by the person who posted them), and on the other hand, even more significantly, because, in our experience, Facebook comments tend to react not to the content, but merely to the title of the news articles. Thus, we reduced the number of comments to be investigated to 12,837.

For the purposes of content processing, we introduced the distinction between *primary comment* and *reply comment*. We referred as “primary comments to the posts reacting directly to the new articles, as opposed to “reply comments branching out from the primary comments. The total number of comments includes both primary and secondary comments.

The number of comments was established on the basis of the information provided by the website counters. Unfortunately, however, these do not all count the comments in the same way. Some websites (e.g. 24.hu) only count the primary comments, while others (all other news portals included in our research) take all comments into account. On some sites (hvg.hu) the comment number appearing next to the articles does not correspond to the actual number of posts in the comments section. We suspected that this is because of the deleted comments, but could not substantiate this guess. Thus, we regarded the numbers published by the news portals in their respective comments sections as authoritative.

For the purposes our quantitative analysis, we only included the primary comments into our account. If it was necessary, we quoted the comments precisely, without any grammatical corrections. At the most, we made some necessary omissions, duly indicated in each case. The names of the two protagonists of the story were changed to A and D.

The quantitative investigation of the comments was supplemented with qualitative analysis. Comments have been divided into two categories: “in favour A – against D” and “in favour of D – against A”. From these two categories, we extracted the most common and typical attitudes supporting the respective positions.

In our analysis of the comments, we were interested in the following aspects:

1. The activity of the commenting readers, i.e. how active commenting readers are, which are the news bringing in the most comments, and the dynamics of the comments.

2. The attitudes expressed by the commenting readers. In this respect, we established the opposition between the attitudes supporting the victim and those in favour of the harasser.

4. The quality of the comments.

Case history

As part of the #MeToo campaign in Hungary, A published a Facebook post about how she was sexually harassed 20 years earlier, as a young actress, by a theatre director (D). D first denied the charges. Then, after several more women accused him of harassment, he worded an apology containing vague and general statements, without any acknowledgment of the accusations or repentance.

Comments analysis. Figures

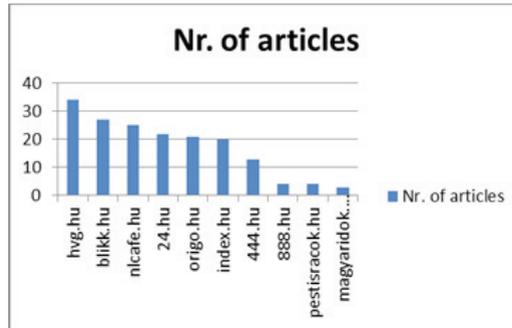
We based our calculation on the figures indicated by the official counters on the websites on 1 March 2018. The date should be noted because comments have been, in many cases, removed either by the moderators or by the commenting readers themselves. It is often quite obvious that commenting readers argue with an already deleted comment, but the reconstruction of the conversation is no longer possible.

We have only taken into consideration the primary comments when counting the comments for and against A and D, restricting ourselves to the unambiguous positions. If the comment expressed doubts, considering whether to support the victim or the harasser, then it was not included in our “pro and contra” scheme. In this case, the results are, of course, interpretation-dependent.

Event	Nr. of articles	Nr. of comments	Pro A – contra D	Pro D – contra A
October 14-16, 2017 Several news sites pick up A's Facebook post .	9	666	7	35
November 17, 2017 A is asked to name the harasser	6	57	5	31
November 19, 2017 A names the harasser. D denies everything and threatens to sue.	31	3200	93	184
October 20, 2017 D suspends his activity both as a theatre director and as a university teacher until the clarification of the issue.	18	1590	79	56
October 21-25, 2017 More victims come forward.	40	2642	116	194
October 26, 2017 D issues an apology. His colleagues support him.	27	1747	137	86
October 27, 2017 The theatre fires D and he is also excluded from the members of the Hungarian Academy of Arts (MMA).	21	1231	33	52
October 31- November 1, 2017 Harassment claims against D from Canada.	7	483	56	1
November 8-10, 2017 D speaks about his shaken mental health and about still considering to sue.	14	1231	43	107
Total	173	12847	569	746

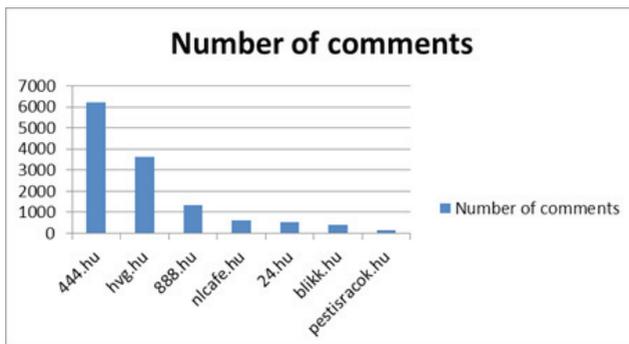
Activity of the news portals

The news portals included in our research had different attitudes toward the issue. Some followed the events closely, dedicating individual articles to new developments. Others joined in late and barely dealt with the subject.

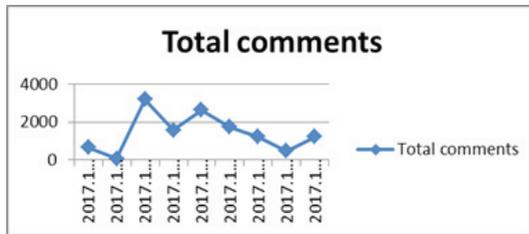


The reserved attitude of the pro-government media is striking: with the exception of origo.hu, which published 21 relevant news articles, the other three pro-government news portals dedicated a mere 3 or 4 reports to the event during the period under investigation. At the same time, it is also worth noting that the number of articles published on the web portals is not always proportionate to the number of the comments. The readers of 444.hu have proven themselves to be particularly active, with almost twice as many comments than the followers of other sites. The readers of 888.hu were highly active as well, producing a significant amount of comments, although the portal published a mere 4 articles on the topic.

Number of comments for each news site



The activity of the commenting readers



The joint examination of the number of comments and of the timeline reveals that, while the harassment charges were anonymous, commenter activity was also sparser. Most comments were made on the day A named her harasser, and D dismissed the charges as slander. Another peak in the number of comments was caused by the emergence of new victims. It seems that the phenomenon itself could not engage the commenting readers to the extent of the specific case, when they learned not only the identity of the victim(s) but also of the harasser, who also received a face.

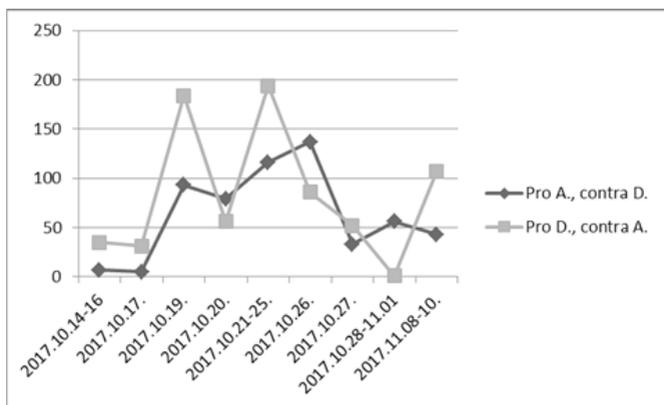
Main comment categories: pro A – contra D, pro D – contra A

Following the quantitative processing of the comments, we restricted the qualitative perspective to the primary comments obviously supporting one of the parties (victim vs. harasser). The comments were included in two main categories: pro A – contra D and pro D – contra A, corresponding to the two potential opposite views that can be expressed in this virtual debate. We included into the first category the comments sympathetic to the actress and condemnatory of the theatre director, and in the second category the statements condemning the actress and sympathetic to the director. Although the support for one of the parties does not always involve the condemnation of the other within a category, the categories thus established can be regarded as coherent and include the various expressions of the two opposing standpoints (e.g. the first category includes comments supporting the actress, comments condemning the director, and comments simultaneously supporting the actress and condemning the director).

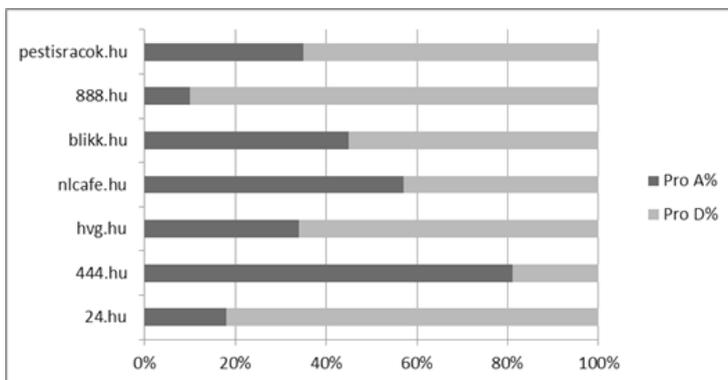
The analysis of the data reveals that the supporters of the director were more numerous than those of the actress. In fact, the support for the harasser becomes highest when he is named and with the emergence of new victims. This can be explained by the fact that D is a recognized and popular theatre director in Hungary. Hence, the majority of the commenting readers decides that, since the accusations cannot be proven, they will rather give credit to

the director. This situation remains unchanged after the emergence of two new victims. Some of the commenting readers still consider the charges as unprovable and the accusers as lacking credibility.

The support for the actress is highest when the vague apology of the director is published. Many commenting readers regarded the apology as an admission and praised the courageous stance of the actress.



Support for the victim vs. the harasser in the primary comments



Perhaps one of the most surprising findings is that the commenting readers as a group tend to protect the harasser and to blame the victim: 43% of the primary comments express support for A and/or condemn D, while 57% support D and blame A. Victim blaming is strongest on 888.hu (90%), while also being significant on other news portals (82% on 24.hu, 66% on hvg.hu). The commenting readers of the website 444.hu showed the greatest openness toward the

victim. Here, 81% of the primary comments supported the victim and blamed the harasser. Merely 2 (!) of the news portals included in the survey supported the victim in higher proportion than the harasser (444.hu, nlcafe.hu).

The categorisation of the comments

The comment section tends to be the deepest pit of Internet hell. In the shadow of online anonymity, commenters are much more uninhibited in their statements than they would be if their identity would be known or face-to-face. Hence, researchers who venture here have to equip themselves with great patience.

The attitude of the online press toward the comments is not coherent. Although the law establishes that the media outlet is responsible for the content of the comments, and it must take action in order to exclude obscene, abusive, hateful, and inflammatory comments, in our experience, none of the examined online platforms fulfils this requirement completely. In order to eliminate the problem, some news sites completely prohibit commenting (as index.hu, magyaridok.hu, and origo.hu in our sample), and redirect comments to Facebook or Twitter. Other portals monitor the comments, as 444.hu does since 2016:

“A pre-moderation system will be implemented. That is to say, the comments will be published on the website only if approved by the moderator. Of course, this could not work if the moderator would have to read through all the comments. Even an army of moderators would not be enough for that. The most active commenters, who write 90% of the comments, are put on the white list, which means that their comments are published faster, without pre-moderation” – said Péter Új about the system.

(<https://444.hu/2016/01/15/vita-van-vita-lesz-de-maskeppen>)

As for other news sites (e.g. 24.hu, 888.hu), there are no signs of any moderation activity, although all sites have a published statement (under the designation “conditions of use” or “data protection statement”) prohibiting certain behaviours for commenting readers (e.g. profanities, obscenities, and offensive words, shocking and fear-inspiring phrases, hate speech, etc.).

Deleted comments could reflect moderating activity, although then it is not clear why other comments clearly violating the terms of use have been kept on the website. E.g. the web portal 888.hu kept the comment: “Wow, she’s such an ugly bitch, I can’t imagine who ever had her” (S.S., 888.hu), which is immediately followed by a deleted post (“This comment has been removed”). If the second comment was deleted by a moderator, it must have been harsher than the offensive comment just cited.

We have broken down the analysis of the comments in two directions. On the one hand, we identified the main categories of the pro and con attitudes, and on the other hand, we tried to establish some observations about the quality of the texts.

We are aware of the fact that the number of comments is not proportionate to the number of commenters. There are highly active commenters and also people who are present on the online platforms only for a couple of comments. For the purposes of our study, we concentrated on the comments and not on the commenters.

Opinion types

Since the quantitative analysis revealed that the majority of the primary comments condemn A and support D, we have begun our qualitative analysis with this group. In order to exemplify these types of opinions, we have also taken into consideration the secondary comments, seeking to bring examples from all the examined news portal.

Contra A – pro D

The statements against the actress who spoke out about her harassment and in favour of the theatre director crystallized around the following issues:

1. The narrator (A) is unreliable

The commenting readers raised several issues regarding her statement. The perhaps most common objection took the shape of a rhetorical question. Why did she wait 20 years with the accusations, and why did she not step forward when the supposed harassment has taken place?! After 20 years, the accusation cannot be proven; but it also cannot be proven that it did not take place. This procedure is unfair, on the one hand, to the accused, who is put into the situation of being unable to exonerate himself, and on the other hand, if the accusations are justified, it is unfair to those could have been or have been exposed to harassments during the following 20 years.

“if you have kept your mouth shut 20 years ago, then you should also shut up now” (I.H., 24.hu)

“She needed 20 years to become aware that she has been harassed? Ridiculous.” (Z.G., 24.hu)

The next claim reflects the typical victim blaming procedure. Some commenters reproached the aspiring actress that she got into the car with two men as a 19-year-old. They considered that she did not receive a good educa-

tion and that her mother should have told her that it is not appropriate/not permitted to get into cars with men and to go up to hotel rooms. If a young girl does such things, then she should only blame herself.

“So, what were you looking for in that car anyway, A.???” (R.Sz., 24.hu)

“Now seriously, who did ever, as a woman, get into the car of her male teacher, alone, as an 18-year-old (T., blikk.hu)

Some commenters even considered her acting career as a factor that discredits her as an accuser. An actress is capable of playing any role, even that of a harassed woman, deeply disturbed by the events, although none of her story is true. Their attacks also did not spare the other women who spoke out about how D has harassed them.

“They’re all hookers, now playing the nun. Role playing actresses.” (M.J., 24.hu)

Others simply considered A a liar.

“The broad is simply full of shit.” (wixezuxi, blikk.hu)

Also, various reasons were sought behind the coming forward of the victim. One of the most frequently invoked motives was the seeking of publicity and fame.

“I would only like to know who is this insignificant nobody of the one hundred thousandth order, this woman impersonator of a creature? And she only remembers it now, after 20 years, that she has also tried the casting couch! But, alas, it was in vain, since we don’t even know who she is, and even if we would know, this is the only reason she did it.” (T.M., 24.hu)

Still others suspected mysterious political objectives behind her coming forward, moving the director husband of the actress (who, as it happens, is a member of the opposition).

“It would be nice to figure it out on whose toes did uncle D step.” (V., pestisracok.hu)

There were also those who were sure that it is all about money:

“I wonder how much money this A got, and still gets, for this disclosure.” (B2, hvg.hu)

The victim also had to endure many personal attacks from the commenting readership, who did not spare her looks, age, professional career, or even her very identity as a woman:

“Couldn’t you use a nicer picture? She looks like a neurotic hamster.” (Zs2, blikk.hu)

Many comments even crossed the line to virtual sexual harassment:

“Dear A, I wouldn’t touch you with a stick.” (V.S., 24.hu)

Finally, the actress received numerous of attacks when a video of a theatre scene found its way to YouTube. In this scene, directed by her husband, she had to satisfy two men on the stage bare naked. So, for the people who commented upon it, this scene demonstrates that A is lying, since the events she presented as harassment could not have really bothered her so much, if she was able to play such an openly sexual scene on stage. Some commenters did not make any distinction between the real-life event experienced by a young woman and the later theatrical role, simply lumping the two situations together.

“Those who protect this woman and believe her story have probably missed her porn ‘comedy’ scene shared below! It’s worth seeing and it will make all her accusations seem ridiculous. I rather believe now that, in fact, she was the harasser, and D ran from her screaming!” (M.H., 24.hu)

2. The story is not authentic

Some people questioned the story or specific details: the narrative is not sufficiently detailed and coherent; what happened before and after the events; how could the director have knelt on the backseat of the BMW, did he even have enough space for this?

“I’m so sick of all these exaggerated alleged harassment cases. They are all, one by one, inauthentic.” (B2, hv.g.hu)

3. The issue of the casting couch

According to many commenters, there is nothing to wonder about here. Everyone has heard the expression “casting couch”. Anyone who wants to be an actress has to be ready for this.

“The casting couch. It’s an existing thing, isn’t it? Then why all the talcum powder? This is PART of the theatre! Just like the door, the window, and the stage. It’s been around forever.” (S.J., hv.g.hu)

It is interesting to observe how invoking the “casting couch” forces some commenters to adopt self-contradictory positions. On the one hand, they consider it to be natural, and wonder why women pretend to be outraged, since everyone knows about this institution. On the other hand, they also blame women for “lying down” on the couch. The possibility of guilt on the directors’ part is not even considered; the women, however, are morally blamed. The “casting couch” situation is no harassment, since it is an eternal institution. But if the woman accepts it as natural, then she is a prostitute:

“The casting couch is not harassment, but business. If you spread your legs, you get the job. If not, the you don’t. There’s no coercion. If the woman accepts, it says a lot about her.” (B.I., hvg.hu)

4. Women as sexual harassers and profiteers

The attitude against A often turns into generalizations about women. Some of these comments deny the fact of harassment by presupposing that women, in fact, enjoy such gestures, presented here as harassment.

“Most women don’t really have to be egged on to have sex, and they put out pretty much everything for show, which is an invitation to dance.” (B2, hvg.hu)

There are commenters who reverse the charges. The sexual harassment is, according to them, not committed by the men (or not only by them), but by the women, when they dress and act provocatively:

“How many young women are there who put on the miniskirt, put out their tits, and walk into the boss’ office to get a raise? Now what do you call this? Sexual abuse or offering yourself up?” (P., 444.hu)

5. Sexual harassment charges cannot be disproved after 20 years

After the identity of the harasser was revealed, most comments rather supported than condemned the theatre director accused of harassment. According to these readers, the director is a victim because he cannot exonerate himself. One cannot prove anymore either the harassment or its lack. Hence, anyone can be ruined with this script. If any woman wants to get revenge, she just has to accuse a man of sexual harassment. People will believe the woman, and the man will have no possibility to defend himself.

“She should be ashamed of herself. Now she remembers, after 20 years, ruining an old and respected man.” (E.T., 24.hu)

6. D is an excellent professional

Many commenters praised the theatre director’s past successes and his glorious career, commiserating with him for being the victim of this unprovable accusation destroying his lifetime achievements. They questioned the merit of the accusations due of the director’s longstanding and well-respected professional career, even receiving important state honours. Hence, these readers could not imagine such an image being overshadowed by his reprehensible behaviour:

“It’s the typical Hungarian mentality: his guilt is not proven, but he’s already punished! What a foul thing to happen: to kick out a Kossuth prize

winning director from the theatre, before any court would have condemned him?! It's just a little actress who's saying (probably prompted by her dear hubby) that D showed her his cock! I deeply condemn violence, but I won't believe anything at first hearing." (K.L., 24.hu)

7. Even if it happened, it is not harassment

Some commenters were just puzzled by the case. They could not figure out what the harm was. After all, there was no violence here, just a "try" ("seduction" attempt). The actress said no, and the director accepted her answer. So, these people accuse the actress, and women in general, with excessive sensitivity. This will, according to them, eventually lead to men being afraid of trying anything, so humanity could even die out as a result.

"A man's a man, so he has to try (and indeed, women would feel desolate if he wouldn't), and the woman can say no anytime, if she so chooses!!!" (MS, 24.hu)

According to these readers, nothing special happened here. The actress, getting into a car with two strange men, in fact showed her willingness, and the theatre director interpreted her gesture as such. It's only natural that the director had an "attempt", and there is nothing wrong with any of this. Women often dress and behave provocatively, and then wonder why men make them offers.

"If he's not sympathetic to you, then it's harassment, but if he's sympathetic, then it's a flirt, or something even beyond that." (D. K., 24.hu)

Many comments completely blur the line between harassment with rape, and "refute" the accusation of harassment through denying rape:

"Who didn't ask a 20-year-old woman to kiss it [i.e. one's penis]. The story says nothing about violence, roughness or coercion. So, what's the matter?" (G. G., 444.hu)

8. The whole thing is just an apish imitation of the Western decaying capitalism

There were comments interpreting the accusations of harassment as a mere fashion phenomenon. Their authors considered that A and the other victims stepped forward with stories that happened long ago because they want to imitate the Harvey Weinstein scandal.

"This whole affair with D is part of an international campaign and has nothing to do with reality. Some people are surely making good money from this." (IM, 24.hu)

Similarly to the results of *The Guardian* comment analysis, most people blame the woman and defend the man (Gardiner, Becky et al. 2016). This research, based on the deleted comments of *The Guardian*, has established that 8 of the 10 authors most exposed to offensive comments are women and the 10 most spared are all white males. The gender inequality exposed in the case of *The Guardian* was confirmed by our own research: the majority doubted the credibility of the victimized woman and supported the male harasser.

Pro A – contra D

The support for the victim and the blaming of the harasser began to increase as more women came forward to tell (usually anonymously) their own harassment stories, and D issued an apology in the press. The statements supporting the victim and blaming the harasser can be included in the following typical categories:

1. Statements encouraging A

Some commenters praised the courage and the tenacity of the actress, emphasizing how difficult it is for a harassed person to recount her traumatic experiences. They were of the opinion that the victims of other similar events should also assume publicity, precisely in order not to leave the actress alone and for people to stop doubting the authenticity of the story.

“Congratulations, A! You’re strong and righteous. This man wanted to take advantage of your dependent status (you were a young woman, maybe an aspiring actress back then). You have now encouraged many hundred thousands of harassed women to step forward, if men in powerful positions wanted to use them or have used them.” (J.S., 24.hu)

2. Condemnation of the harassment

Comments condemning the harassment started to appear as soon as the story broke. Their tone was quite varied, from the more reserved to the harsh. Most commenters were able to abstract from the specific person of the harasser and condemned harassment as such. Many of them also perceive that harassment is enabled by the authority position:

“It’s not about who’s a gentleman and who isn’t, and it’s not about sex, but exclusively about the abuse of authority.” (N.O., 444.hu)

3. Condemnation of the harasser as a person

As A named her harasser, the comments sections exploded. The number of comments has multiplied. D is a well-known and recognized person in the theatre world. Many commenters expressed their disappointment, while oth-

ers gave voice to their disapproval in coarser tones, calling D offensive and insulting names. This antipathy spilt over to two actors who protected the director. The accusatory tone increased as more victims made their appearance and D issued an evasive and unrepentant apology statement.

“Here’s someone who repeatedly abused his power in order to satisfy his desires. He doesn’t sue for false accusations. He’s kicked out of his job, doesn’t sue for that either. If someone is innocent and doesn’t defend himself, then he must be stupid. However, we cannot suppose about a well-recognized theatre director that he’s stupid. So, the bottom line is that he’s not innocent and perfectly aware of it, too. Then there’s that lukewarm “oh, please excuse me if I offended someone’ Facebook-post.” (T.G., 24.hu)

Coarse insults and personal attacks were also made:

“If he has a strong communist past and communist ties and he’s liberal and Jewish as well, then he’s practically untouchable.” (O, 888.hu)

Several comments discussed a rather unfortunate fragment of A’s confession about D’s “small and flabby penis”, a topic repeatedly discussed by these commenters mercilessly and with great fondness.

4. Condemnation of D’s apology

The theatre director first dismissed the accusation as slander, and then, after a few days, he came forward with an apology. Many people considered this text insufficient, insensitive, and even offensive, expressing their displeasure. D offered a general apology for those whom he may have hurt with his behaviour, as he only now realized that some women may have not received well his advances.

“This is just whitewashing the issue, not an apology. He still appears as the great creative genius, who’s just been misunderstood.” (A., 444.hu)

Someone has also written a pithy ironic summary of the apology:

“Let me translate for you: Damn it, all the whores have come forward. But now, shut up.” (J., 444.hu)

5. Recounting similar stories

Some commenters recounted their own stories and similar experiences, one the one hand, in order to attest A’s credibility, and on the other hand, to raise awareness of the psychological burden of such an event in other readers. We will refrain here from citing these confessions, since, although their authors have undertaken to share their stories in an online comments section, it cannot be taken for granted that they would also agree to see them in print.

Values and worldviews behind the comments

Some comments have put issue into a wider perspective. The case also offered an apropos for expressing political beliefs and world views. These could be structured around the following themes:

1. Men-women relations

There were commenters who indulged themselves in premature generalizations regarding both male and female behaviour. A kind of “battle of the sexes” ensued, which is prominent, but not decisive for the entire comments section. “That’ s what women are like” and “that’ s what men are like” type statements were both present. Women were condemned for their appearance and behaviour:

“Women already commit sexual harassment with their looks and appearance.” (F.A., nlcafe.hu)

Some commenters gave vent to their indignation with variations on the theme of “all men are pigs”:

“Some Hungarian men consider women in close relation to them their property. They’re worse than Muslims. But this sort is also afraid of women with appropriate self-confidence.” (M.E., 24.hu)

Sometimes the comment flow turned into a give-and-take:

“Now at least everyone can see how despicable men are when it comes to women!” (J.P., hvg.hu)

Response:

“Is it men’s’ fault that all women are whores?” (K., hvg.hu)

Certain readers concluded from this event that the (traditional) family is in danger, as men’s and women’s roles are changing, which will eventually lead to a catastrophe. The ones to be blamed for this are the women, or more precisely, the “feminazis”.

“The horse has bolted, so to speak, with the liberation of women, and the man-woman relationship has been degraded into a political struggle for power, which can ultimately even lead to the extinction of mankind.” (P.I., nlcafe.hu and 24.hu)

Several commenters directly linked to, or interpreted the harassment charges as feminism, using the term not in a neutral and descriptive manner, but with negative connotations, as a swearword.

“These Pussy Riotist, feminist cunts were the last thing we needed in this country.” (J., hvg.hu)

“The feminists want to drink men’s blood in the evening.” (J, hvg.hu)

In the heat of online commenting, harsh insults were sometimes uttered as well, usually directed at women:

“Most commenters’ cunts are braided with cobwebs. It makes your stomach turn. My proposal for a solution for Hungarian women: don’t wash anymore, eat like pigs, walk around barefoot with cracked heels, and don’t leave your house below 330 pounds.” (G., pestisracok.hu)

2. Anti-liberalism

The protagonists of the case were identified as “liberals” in several comments and their behaviour was attributed to “liberalism”. This “liberalism” has, of course, nothing to do with the political-philosophical category. It is a stigma functioning in current Hungarian society as another swearword primarily for those who do not support the hegemony of the conservative-religious worldview. The “libtards” who are under the spell of this ideology live in a state of moral depravity, sympathize with the migrants, and are financed by George Soros. Although D was sometimes also considered a liberal, the “accusation” was most often levelled against A and her director husband. On the one hand, the “dredging up” of events that took place 20 years back was considered to be a kind of “liberal hypersensitivity”, and on the other hand, their theatre style was seen as a “liberal perversion”.

“Isn’t it interesting how these same liberal ladies and gentlemen, who now hypocritically yammer, had nothing to moan about when the news reports were about the sexual assaults committed by the migrants.” (I., 888.hu)

„If the accusation will be proven false, then this gender-story will cost A’s family millions, but hey, no problem, Soros will easily pay it from his breast pocket...” (N, hvg.hu)

3. Racism

Anti-Semitic comments came up at quite an early stage on some websites (888.hu, hvg.hu, pestisracok.hu). Commenters used anti-Jewish slurs against the party they happened to have a grudge against:

“Playacting, theatrics, photography, films and such have always been Jewish genres.” (M.L., 888.hu)

As the (right-wing) news portal 888.hu published a photograph of the actress on which she appeared with a Romani group, the commenters even found time for some casual hate speech against Gypsies:

“Who the fuck are these dirty Gypsies on this picture?” (F., 888.hu)

The quality of communication

The comments on this case were not for the faint of heart. The texts were, in many instances, abysmal, regarding both their content and their form, full of obscenities and hurtful remarks, all the way down to insulting each other's mothers. The traces of moderating interventions are sometimes recognizable (in deleted comments, threats of exclusion, e.g. on the [hvg.hu](#) website). However, the dominant style on other websites (e.g. [888.hu](#)) is so vulgar that it leaves one to wonder about the possible criteria of the website moderation policy, if there are any at all (although many comments have been removed, several vulgar and offensive texts were present).

Among the analysed online forums, the comments on [444.hu](#) were the only (mostly) bearable ones, with obscene, offensive, and rude texts rather as exceptions, while the exception was civilized communication on other websites.

Sometimes longer texts also occur in the stream of posts, but these argued opinions involved in rational debate with each other were rare and refreshing oases. The desert of the comment section is full of short posts of a few lines, merely expressing an opinion without any arguments, only with incidental connection to the news articles under which they appear.

Here is a gem to exemplify this vulgar level:

“Your mother was a stupid whore for not punching you in the face. If you like distorting so much, then distort your mother's cunt.” (._._ [888.hu](#))

Nevertheless, truly witty posts, using irony and humour to state their point, can also be found, being usually aimed at the ambivalent statements of the director:

“So now he has understood... :/ that there are women who are not happy about and consider intrusive a cock showed in their face... You live, you learn.” (Sz., [nlcafe.hu](#))

Another wave of irony started when people found out that the theatre director was involved in similar cases in Canada as well:

“I thought he was just a dime-a-dozen director, and now I find out that he's world famous. I also accept requests for literary translations here. I'll translate D's apologies to all world languages.” (B., [444.hu](#))

The dynamics of the comments

We distinguished between primary comments and reactions. Primary comments were, in almost all cases, fewer than replies, making up an average of 20% of total posts, with the sole exception of the website [pestisra-](#)

cok.hu, where 65% of the reactions to the 4 published articles were primary comments. That is to say, commenters were more likely to grab the keyboard in order to reply to others than to comment upon the article itself. Primary comments were also more inclined than the replies to explain their authors' position.

The longer debates usually went on between two commenters, with other readers sometimes joining in for a couple of posts, while the general pattern of the shorter quarrels consisted in refutations or confirmations of an individual comment, coming from many sides; i.e. some comments attracted the attention of many other commenters and made them react.

On the news portal 444.hu, the escalation of the debate was sometimes prevented by the commenters themselves, who warned and disciplined each other, pointing out distortions and logical fallacies.

The majority of the primary comments (as indicated by the quantitative analysis) were pro D and contra A, with counter-opinions stated mostly in the replies. Fewer commenters have taken the initiative in order to encourage A than those willing to blame the victim.

Because several news portals use the DISQUS platform, which enables readers to comment on many platforms using the same nickname, there were also some comments repeated verbatim under several articles.

(b) The linguistic approach

The linguistic approach analyses the mode of discussion of the phenomenon. How is the victim and the perpetrator presented in the online press and by the commenters? What are the linguistic images expressing the harassment?

According to our hypothesis, since information is not always verified in the online space, and expressing one's opinions becomes almost more important than the fact itself, the knowledge ingrained in language use also changes. We attributed major importance to the reconstruction of linguistic images, leading to the exploration of underlying value systems, tangentially also pointing out phenomena such as the dichotomy of silence and expression (speaking out), conceptualized as social phenomena in an anthropological and ethnographic approach.

Conceptual framework

The linguistic expression of phenomena also reveals the value system and the worldview of a community. Language is not only a means of communication, but also a conceptualization process, which, beyond merely describing

and communicating facts about the world, organizes, systematizes, and evaluates them as well. This issue is discussed in the field of linguistic worldview research, a subbranch of linguistics dealing with the everyday experiences and the naïve knowledge of the speaking community, as it is represented within language. The linguistic worldview is always associated with a specific linguistic community, in which a mental reality is built upon objective reality, producing a kind of mental antitype of external reality (Hegedűs 2000: 132–136). The linguistic image of the world works as a conceptual background determining word formation and the production of expressions (Nyomárkay 2010: 189).

Bañcerowski Janusz's views are worth considering in the research on the Hungarian linguistic worldview, both in the field of cultural linguistics and in cognitive linguistics: "The linguistic image of the world, as a language- and culture-dependent formation, is an image based on the knowledge of the average language user about the objects, phenomena, and relationships of the world. This image is entrenched in language and only becomes accessible through language. (...) It is the understanding and interpretation of this world according to the philosophy of common sense, the totality of everyday experiences, as well as of the norms, values, valuations, and ideas produced or received and accepted by the language community, along with their classification with regard to the material and the spiritual reality." (Bañcerowski 2009: 43)

At the same time, the linguistic worldview is also the imprint of an experienced common past upon language, since it entails the set of common information within collective memory. This set of information records the past experiences and the mode of life of the language community as well, while influencing the present as a behavioural model to be followed (or rejected) (Magyari 2015).

The public discussion of sexual harassment is a recent phenomenon within Hungarian culture. Although a few works of art have touched upon this issue, e.g. the novel *Puszták népe* (The People of the Puszta) by Gyula Illyés or Simon Hollósy's painting *Tengerihántás* (Corn Husking), they never started any public debate of such proportions. However, this "debate" has become bipolar due to the exclusively positive or exclusively negative assessment of the people involved. Humans generally experience the world according to binary oppositions (Lévi-Strauss 1969) and this bipolarity determines the development of their value systems in their conceptualization processes. Ultimately, we compare everything to the positive and to the negative values. This means that we mentally create a reality based on complementary opposites. In black and white terms, our environment is good or bad, beautiful or ugly, ours or someone else's, etc. Positive values are always included in the category of *we*, i.e. what is *ours* is good, beautiful, and valuable, while that which belongs to

them is organized along the lines of negative values. This duality also appears within the MeToo phenomenon.

Research methodology

Since the examined corpus consists of online press materials, the issue of representativity was one of the key problems of our research. The software from the website Alexa.com² can compute the list of the most visited websites by countries. According to this database, the most widely read (clicked on) Hungarian daily news portals are: Index (6485 average daily downloads), Origo (4731 average daily downloads), and 24.hu (1581 average daily downloads). We included the top three into the corpus submitted to our linguistic analysis. Thus, 26 reports (Index – 9, Origo – 7, 24.hu – 10) and 251 comments were included in the corpus from the three portals, the comments being exclusively from the last one.

In her presentation of the methodological steps of narrative analysis, Jane Stokes (2008, 82) recommended researchers to analyse “at most five days of daily news” for a news story. Thus, we limited our analysis of the news corpus of the three web portals about sexual harassment and the associated readers’ comments (allowed only on the website 24.hu) to the period 14-25 October 2017. The period under review includes 14, 15, 17, 19, 20 October in case of the Index web portal, 19, 20, 21, 24, 25 October for Origo, and 14, 16, 17, 19, 21 October for 24.hu. The texts published in this period only discussed the sexual harassment case of A and D.

In compiling the corpus, all news articles and associated comments were included into the database. We did not use predetermined hypotheses, but employed instead the corpus-centred approach (Balaskó 2005). This analytical method starts with the specific linguistic sample, and attempts to formulate generalizations through the investigation of the linguistic corpus.

In the interpretation of linguistic data, we focused on the exploration of linguistic images and conducted narrative analysis as well, “useful for unpacking the ideological message of the text, embedded into the structure” (Stokes 2008, 82). Two separate narratives were pitted against each other within this corpus: the story of A and D’s narrative.

Against the background of this corpus, it would be worth it to also discuss the texts from an ideological perspective and to submit the database to typological and genre analysis, as well as to focus more explicitly on the phenomenon of silence. However, due to our lack of space, all these aspects will only be included into the methodology of another research.

² <https://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/HU> (January 11, 2018)

The issues of the linguistic research

(b1) The linguistic approach focuses on the mode of discussion directed at the MeToo phenomenon. (b2) How is the victim and the perpetrator presented in the online press and (b3) by the commenters? What are the linguistic images expressing the harassment?

(b4) According to our hypothesis, since information is not always verified in the online space, and expressing one's opinions becomes almost more important than the fact itself, the knowledge ingrained in language use also changes. We attributed major importance to the reconstruction of linguistic images, leading to the exploration of underlying value systems, (b5) tangentially also pointing out phenomena such as the dichotomy of silence and expression (speaking out), conceptualized as social phenomena within an anthropological and ethnographic approach.

In our linguistic approach, we interpreted the data on the basis of the above five criteria.

The interpretation of the linguistic data

(b1) We will analyse here, from a linguistic perspective, how the MeToo phenomenon is discussed and the images through which the harassment itself is expressed.

Based on the textual corpus, *sexual harassment* is talked about in such terms as *rape, casting couch, bitching, drama, affairs of men, men as fools who follow their cock, one-night stand, malarkey, slander, revenge, attention seeking, exploitation, molestation, grievance, traumatic experience, lie, spectacle, manly exchange of winks, she was the one to climb on top of the director, dark deed, attempt, seduction, genetic inheritance, private brothel, humiliation*.

In the legal sense, harassment is synonymous with intimidation, molestation, the issuing of insults, and threatening behaviour (Btk. 222), while from a psychological perspective it is a behaviour perceived as annoying, insulting, humiliating, indecent, etc. (Bartha 2017). In this case, these two approaches can be regarded as the basis of the main meaning. That is to say, harassment is an action with negative connotations, based a relationship of subordination and involving a perpetrator (aggressor) and a victim.

This negative aspect is relativized in this corpus. Very few concepts qualify the events as sexual harassment in this specific case (*rape, exploitation, molestation*). The case is more often confused with manly behaviour and with the role played by the "real man" (*men as fools who follow their cock, one-night stand, manly exchange of winks*), while also being conceptualized as

negative female behaviour (*bitching, hysteria, malarkey*). There is also a syntagma suggesting that, in this context, sexual harassment as the *casting couch* can be regarded as a standard practice in the theatrical world.

An interesting picture emerges if we also approach from a grammatical perspective, in order to investigate whether the expressions are applied to the active or to the passive subject. The identities of the perpetrator and the victim are not always clear. A appears both as a victim (*rape, exploitation, molestation*) and as an aggressor (*bitching, drama, she was the one to climb on top of the director*). This duality also applies to the assessment of D, who is also seen both as a victim (*foolish man following his cock, [victim] of the spectacle or of the attention seeking woman*) and as a perpetrator (*exploitation, molestation, [cause] of the traumatic event*).

Words and expressions are endowed not only with dictionary (lexical) meanings, but also with contextual, denotative, connotative, modal, syntactic, metaphoric, pragmatic, and value meanings (Máthé 2009). In the present case, the contextual meaning of *sexual harassment* gained several new aspects.

(b2–b3) The following subchapter will answer the question regarding the representation of the victim and of the perpetrator in the online news media and in the comments. It is to be noted, however, that based on the corpus, the identity of the victim is not always clear. Hence, I will use the designations of *accuser* (A) and *accused* (D) in the following.

The representation of the accuser (A) is again ambiguous: she appears both as a victim and as an accuser. According to the method of narrative analysis, we have to start from the aspectuality of self-identification. A characterizes herself thus: “I was young, a virgin, naïve, and crazy about theatre, happy to be admitted to watch a rehearsal” (24.hu).

Narrative analysis is “useful for unpacking the ideological message of the text, embedded into the structure” (Stokes 2008, 82). From this perspective, the self-characterization of the accuser vehiculates the ideology that being young is associated with naïveté, good faith, and trust, while virginity is posited as a virtue and equated with lack of experience.

The corpus associates the images presented below to the accuser. (We restricted ourselves to citing only a few examples.)

The image of the vulnerable woman:

“the woman is a sexual object and a farm animal” (A.K., 24.hu)

“It is also well-known that (...) men of power force young actresses and dancers, and sometimes even male actors (...), who are dependent on them, to sexual favours and to some ‘kind reciprocation’.” (Index)

The image of the upward-striving woman:

“everyone needs their 15 minutes of fame!!!” (K.Z., 24.hu)

The image of the hysterical woman:

“These women’s complaints include cases which are more than justified, but I’m also sure there are plenty exaggerations!” (L.P.K., 24.hu)

The image of the harassing woman:

“Anyone who watches this video will see that this woman is not famous, but notorious. It’s a shame that such a woman opens her mouth and complains about harassment. It may well be that she was the one to climb on top of the director.” (M.P.F., 24.hu)

The image of the attention-seeking woman:

“Well, it’s a way to stand out: she’s been hitherto unknown, now more people recognize her...” (J.M., 24.hu)

The image of the woman as a “slandering whore”:

“This anonymous nobody has held her mouth for twenty years! We didn’t even know who this ugly bitch was! A good man wouldn’t fuck this nasty whore with a stick! Bea Hargitai [Hungarian model and Playmate] has also admitted that the girls are glad to lie down on the casting couch! So now this rat-faced whore complains after twenty or thirty years?!” (Á.T., 24.hu)

The image of the neglected woman:

“These harassment stories have become a big fad, but many neglected women would be glad if someone would harass them.” (IM, 24.hu)

The image of the blamed victim:

“Dear A, don’t give up!!! It’s always the victim who’s blamed in our society.” (A.K., 24.hu)

The image of the vengeful woman:

“Let me repeat it: I’ve seen abused women, and it really is a disgrace! However, this is not the case of this ‘artiste’. What do I see here? An ugly, vindictive, cunning, striving wench.” (Zs.É., 24.hu)

Only 1 of the 9 images of the woman in this corpus has positive content. The remaining eight characterize the victim negatively.

As for the accused (D), we identified the following images.

The image of the domineering man:

“Even back then, D has been the personal representative of God on earth.” (Origo)

“He behaved as someone for whom everything’s permitted and nothing’s off limits.” (Origo)

The image of the evil man:

“He’s a shrewd and cunning man for harassing those most vulnerable.” (Origo)

“He has unscrupulously abused his position of power for decades.” (Origo)

The image of the tyrannical man:

“Wherever men come to occupy positions of power, many of them can’t resist regarding the female world as their private brothel.” (R.P., 24.hu)

The image of the dirty old man:

“It’s quite telling for the situation of women in Hungary that our deeply honoured male commenters unanimously defend this dirty old man, calling A a whore, making abusive comments, or at best, calling her a liar... :(Gentlemen, don’t forget (...) that you also have a mother, or maybe even a daughter (...), and they aren’t exceptions!!!” (K.L., 24.hu)

The image of the man as a liar:

“Mr. D will deny everything and press charges, don’t expect anything else from him. If he now succeeds in intimidating the first woman who dares to stand against him, then the others – as I’m sure there have also been many others – will think twice before saying anything.” (K.V., 24.hu)

The image of the conquering man:

“I haven’t read the article! In my opinion, a man must have a drive for conquering women. This drive is strong in some and weaker in others, but it must be present, since our planet would otherwise go extinct. It’s our genetic heritage, just as feminine charm, and you may court a woman anywhere, be it on the subway, at the marketplace, or even at your workplace.” (B.M., 24.hu)

On the basis of this corpus, none of the 6 images of the man is positively charged. The image of the conqueror may perhaps be seen as neutral, but the negative view is clearly dominant.

The narrative analysis is more difficult to carry out on the basis of our data, since the self-characterization of the accused is lacking. All our information in this regard is implicit, e.g. in D’s resignation letters:

“I declare that the statements regarding my person are false. In order to protect my beloved students from any disturbance, I will suspend my teaching activity until the investigation, which I fully accept.” (Index)

“I declare that the statements regarding my person are false. Today I am resigning from my position as a principal director until this case concerning my person is clarified. I am asking the institution to take note of my resignation. I also inform you that, for similar reasons, today I have requested the suspension of my teaching activity at the University of Theatre.” (Index)

The implicit self-characterization of the accused communicates the ideological message that, as a falsely accused teacher and director, D will step back, so that the work of the institutions can continue, and that he voluntarily accepts the coming investigation.

The corpus reveals that readers associate unambiguously negative images both with the accuser and the accused. The imagery of the comments dominantly presents the accuser in a negative light, while the news articles and the comments jointly shed a bad light on the accused as well. In the latter case, a sense of acquittal can also be felt, along the lines of “men will be men” and of the “universal genetic disposition” of human males.

(b4) According to our hypothesis, since information is not always verified in the online space, and expressing one’s opinions becomes almost more important than the fact itself, the knowledge ingrained in language use also changes. This assumption was proved right. There were 251 comments to the 26 texts from various press genres (news story, report, interview), expressing private opinions, more dominant not only in quantity, but also from the perspective of value judgments. Very few posts (10%) supported the accuser, and value-neutral comments were even fewer (4%). Based on the data, it is also quite striking that the condemning comments are rather personal (usually condemning A, and sometimes also directed against D), but when they are value-neutral or supportive, then they are not addressed to any specific person, but discuss the phenomenon itself, or are directed at men or women more generally.

As an interesting turn of events, after A identifies her harasser, the vehemence of the negative comments is reduced, and the posts become more nuanced, as the negative image of the domineering lecher becomes more dominant. As several posts sharing further harassment stories are published, the image of the upward-striving and vengeful woman also changes, with increased emphasis put on her vulnerability.

(b5) Most comments (72%) touch upon or explicitly discuss the issue of silence versus speaking up (e.g. “if you have held your mouth twenty years ago, then you should also hold your mouth now” – I.H., 24.hu). Sexual harassment is among the taboos of Hungarian culture. Moreover, this is also true for sexuality as such, and there are specific linguistic schemes for discussing this subject (cf. Magyari 2017), or more exactly, linguistic schemes deciding

whether we can speak about it at all, since the linguistic nature of harassment is strongly associated with *silence* and *tacitness*. The ideology according to which the unspoken does not exist is still alive within our communities. Our linguistic manifestations also prove this (as the saying goes: “Let’s not wash our dirty linen in public!” – i.e. let’s not talk about it, if possible, to anyone, anywhere). Our linguistic manifestations associated with harassment are linked to linguistic taboos in such a way that the prohibition applies to conversation topics and words from the domain of sexuality and aggression. The data of the corpus attest this attitude. The texts seem to indicate that the essential point of the debate is not the fact of the harassment or even the truth content of the accusation, but whether harassment can be publicly expressed and discussed.

Conclusions

(a) The analysis of the comments revealed that the dominant attitude in the comments section of the Hungarian online media is to blame the woman and to acquit the harassing man in situations of sexual harassment.

The interpretation of the data revealed that the victim blamers (contra A) are inclined to reduce the case to a man-woman relationship, while the supporters of the victim emphasize the subordination and the position of power.

The online behaviour of the commenters revealed that there are much more reply comments than primary ones. In most cases, the commenters express their emotionally charged opinions quite bluntly. Thus, squabbles are more frequent than actual debates.

(b) Our linguistic analysis of the texts dealing with sexual harassment, published in the most widely read Hungarian electronic media in 2017, was based on 5 criteria. In summary, (b1) there is widespread confusion regarding this issue, as neither the legal nor the psychological definition of harassment is clearly reflected in the online texts. This observation is based, on the one hand, on the images vehiculated about the accused and the accuser, and on the other hand, on the style, mood, and orthography of the comments.

(b2–b3) The assessments of the accuser and the accused are also extreme. Their image is unilaterally positive or negative, but not coherent, although the discursive community dominantly localizes both parties in the negative domain.

(b4–b5) The data show that in the online space, opinion-forming and expression are more relevant than the news value itself. In this case, the news articles served merely as a pretence for the confrontation of the readers’ opinions. The identification of the linguistic images revealed that, in the value

system of the discursive community, the negative connotations are not associated with the fact of sexual harassment, but with its public expression.

The analysis of corpus revealed that, within the duality of silence and speaking out, the Hungarian community prefers silence. Although this has its cultural historical antecedents, the fact that a kind of public discourse on sexual harassment has started in Hungary as well shows that this attitude is in the process of changing.

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