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**THE NATIONAL PATTERS OF LANGUAGE CULTIVATION AND PLAIN
LANGUAGE IN PUBLIC SERVICE**

Abstract

This study analyses public service media's (radio and television) language cultivation practices and the plain communication of public service institutions with the citizens based on Hungarian and international examples. In response to digitalisation, online surfaces have developed new patterns of transmitting and receiving information: the boundaries between the traditionally distinct genres of radio and television have become blurred. At the same time, the previously valid linguistic normative system has become marginalised, and the regulation of the online media space is also increasingly complex. Public service media must also adapt to differentiated user needs on online platforms. The study chronologically presents the development of public service language use, using the practices developed in the second half of the 20th century. Its methodology is formed by analysing the relevant Hungarian and international academic literature, comparative case studies and the materials of interviews and conference debates. As a linguistic compass, public service media and institutions remain indispensable for 21st-century society. They must preserve normative speech, while also integrating the foreign and technical terms created during globalisation and information technological progress into everyday communication in an accessible manner.

Keywords: public service media; language cultivation; linguistic norm; intelligibility; online consumer habits; digitalisation; institutional language politics; globalisation

Introduction

Hungarian language users have always paid special attention to the media's language use. Standard language use by the language norms was defined as one of the most important objectives at the founding of the first Hungarian radio and later television. Two competing opinions have come into conflict in the past few decades in professional circles. According to one camp, exemplary, varied, "faultless" Hungarian should be spoken on the radio and television. At the same time, the other holds that the key is plain language, i.e., the radio and television must not become detached from everyday language use (Balázs 1996: 1). These differences of opinion developed around the competing definitions of language norms and their interpretation. Considering

that the current task is to provide an overview, in a historical context, of the possibilities of preserving one's native language, from the perspective of public service—and, further, to examine the impact of technological change and digitalisation on the native language, the current work will approach public service broadcasting's language preservation role in a normative, i.e., prescriptive way.

During the emergence of the Hungarian dual media system, commercial media distinguished themselves from public service media, precisely regarding questions of language use, promising conversational, entertaining programmes (Balázs 2000: 10). In contrast—according to the reasoning of László Nemesi Attila (2014: 315), the mission of PSM leads it to prefer standard language usage and to consider it the form to be followed, since “as a result of historical progress, this represents the national cohesion of language users with differing dialects and sociocultural backgrounds.” Strengthening national cohesion requires nurturing the native language, and PSM has considered this communal task its own from the outset.

The Role of Public Service Radio and Television in Language Cultivation

Social scientists consider it self-evident that whenever a new medium appears, social publicity changes of necessity as well (Habermas 1962; Castells 2005; see: Bajomi-Lázár 2009). This was the case with the appearance of radio as well. Like most European countries, radio programmes can also be dated to Hungary's first half of the 1920s and the birth of regular broadcasts. Hungarian radio could keep pace with international mechanical and technical progress (Gergely 1975: 11–13). Radio became a mass medium after the Second World War, and by the 1960s and 1970s, it was considered at its height of popularity. H. Varga Gyula (2015: 391) mentions that this makes it all the more surprising that Hungarian radio had yet to reach its 10th birthday before its audience had already encountered language cultivation broadcasts. The cultivation of the Hungarian language was closely connected to the birth of Hungarian national consciousness. The print media played the leading role in this process, but the Hungarian radio, with technological progress, also actively joined this process. What is certain is that the first two decades of radio in Hungary were a huge success. Miklós Kozma, the director of Telefon Hírmondó és Rádió Rt. – this company included the *Telefonhírmondó* [“Telephone Herald”] – set out an ambitious goal for the radio employees in his much-quoted speech on the official opening on 1 December 1925: “Forcing

all business considerations into the background, we will use this weapon solely with the consideration of Hungarian culture in mind” (Boros 2019: 37). The strong interwar culture and language preservation climate favoured the dedicated appearance of language cultivation on Hungarian radio (cf. H. Varga 2015: 392). The radio sought to support the strategy of popularising Hungarian culture by involving external advisors. A prime example is the study conducted by writer and polymath László Németh, *A magyar rádió feladatai* [The Tasks of Hungarian Radio] (1934), which devoted a special section to the radio’s role and importance in language cultivation.¹

Gyula Halász – a polymath geographer, writer, translator, and language cultivator – was a Reader of the Hungarian Radio’s Literary Editorial Board when he launched the programme *Édes anyanyelvünk* [Our Sweet Mother Tongue] in 1934. It became popular decades later, when linguist Lajos Lőrincze – a well-known public figure throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s – took it over at the encouragement of Zoltán Kodály (H. Varga 2015: 393). Lőrincze’s extant statements reveal that the first broadcast of the language cultivation programme he led took place on 15 October 1952, with the five-minute programme being broadcast three times a week from 1961. Decades have passed since then, but the success of *Édes anyanyelvünk* remained unbroken and the programme formed generations’ view of language in Hungary (Romsics 2010, as cited in H. Varga 2015: 394).

The Mass Media Research Institute began operations on 1 July 1969 with a conference titled *Nyelv és Kommunikáció* [Language and Communication], in its newly opened building on Mihály Pollack Square. As communication director Tamás Terestyéni reflected in his speech on the institution’s 40th anniversary in 2009, the Hungarian radio had already included a department dedicated to analysing the audience since 1963. The Mass Media Research Institute thus operated first as a directorate of Hungarian Radio and Television, then, after the separation of the two institutes, as one of the directorates of Hungarian Radio.² The research centre was separated from the Hungarian Radio’s organisation on 1 January 1985 and continued its operation independently. From 1 July 1988, it continued as the Hungarian Public Research Institute (MKI). According to Terestyéni, the name change amounted to a refounding, for although the legal successor continued communication research tasks, it turned its attention more towards public opinion research.

¹ <https://www.mek.oszk.hu/01000/01013/01013.htm#4>

² <http://communicatio.hu/mktt/dokumentumok/konferenciak/2009/tk40/nyitoeloadas.htm>

The leadership of the Hungarian Radio also recognised its responsibility to spread the accurate use and correct pronunciation of the Hungarian language. They formed the Hungarian Radio's Language Committee³ in 1976. A separate Microphone Committee was established in 1986, making it clear that "the radio's level of language, diction and communicative conduct is crucial from the perspective of its effectiveness but also regarding the impact it has on general speech and behavioural culture" (Bencédy 2006: 40). According to linguists László Grétsy and István Szathmári, the leadership of the Radio attempted to abide by the Decree of the 1965 Eger Conference on Pronunciation, the sixth point of which stated that "the Conference turns to the leadership of the Hungarian Radio and Television with the request that they continue to ensure the language technical training of their newsreaders and reporters and if possible to prevent anyone with speech impediments from having access to a microphone as a writer, interviewee or in any other way" (Grétsy–Szathmári 1967: 20).

By the early 1990s, the two committees had developed a list of criteria for determining the "microphone right" of those who regularly appear on the radio. Géza Balázs, member of the Language Committee from 1992 until it ceased operations in 2011 and its director in its last ten years, said in a recent interview on the operation of the Microphone Committee that while the Language Committee primarily played a conceptual consulting role, the Microphone Committee "assisted the work of those who appeared on the radio with scientifically developed training and exam requirements."⁴ Géza Balázs' reflections also reveal that these committees played the role of "gatekeepers" in determining who could address the audience on the public service channel: "Those who met the strictest criteria received a reader's or news anchor's microphone permit. This was followed by the reporter's or specialised reporter's permit. This indicates that everyone could find their role in the system. To provide examples for the first two positions: a radio reader could not have a speech impediment, but this did not rule someone out for the position of specialised reporter. Hungarian Television had a similar committee in the 1980s. The MTVA's so-called Montágh Committee took

³ The Hungarian Radio's Language Committee was formed in 1976. This body conducted theoretical, conceptual and practical analytical work regarding the language used by the radio. (The microphone permits required for speaking were issued by the Microphone Committee.) The Committee initially performed its tasks based on orders from the director and on the public service broadcast regulations. It reported on the state of the language on the radio every three years.

⁴ <https://urania.szfe.hu/2024/03/tudatossag-onfegyelem-egyeni-szinek>

over the role of the former language committees, but it did not adopt the system of microphone permits.”

As observed by Gyula H. Varga (2015: 395), the positions of language cultivation and disseminating linguistic knowledge were significantly weakened after the regime change, to which the decline of the Society for the Dissemination of Public Knowledge, attacks on language cultivators and Lajos Lőrincze’s death in 1993 all contributed. Although *Édes anyanyelvünk* survived as a periodical (*Édes anyanyelvünk*), the Hungarian Radio’s language office was closed, and the famous marble chamber language cultivation conferences ceased with it. The Montágh Committee mentioned by Géza Balázs⁵ bears the name of renowned logopedist and speech therapist Imre Montágh, former director of Hungarian Television’s once-famous language cultivation programmes and professor of phonetics and speech training at the University of Theatre and Film Arts between 1968 and 1986. The Committee, established in July 2011, first bore the name of the Native Language Screen and Microphone Committee, before receiving Imre Montágh’s name on 1 January 2012.⁶

The radio’s language use was seen as the model and guardian of the Hungarian language, the transmitter of language norms. With the appearance of digitalisation and the multiplication of broadcasters and online platforms, the professional actors who guarded the correct use of the language according to linguistic standards have been forced into the background. Although the stated goal of the Montágh Committee is still nurturing the Hungarian language’s culture, its influence has undoubtedly declined compared to its predecessor organisations.

Meanwhile, the appearance and widespread use of the internet have further weakened attempts at language cultivation and the preservation of the quality of language use. The spread of the written language in online communication has not only brought a decline in the quality of everyday language use. But also But also but also But also, the new information and communication technologies have created new language norms and, more, have done so at the expense of the near total exclusion of linguistic standards based on traditional literary literacy, by translating the living spoken language and slang into writing. Furthermore, public service radio and television have

⁵ The creation of cultural value and simultaneously the preservation of existing value, while placing special emphasis on nurturing the culture of native language and behavioural culture, is the express task of public service broadcasters. The MTVA created the Montágh Committee as the successor of the Microphone Committee.

⁶ <https://media-akademia.hu/montagh-testulet/a-testulet-mukodese>

also lost the elevated role they previously held through consumers' access to a near-limitless number of radio and television channels from the early 2000s, not to mention the range of social media on offer (Szűts–Szűts–Novák 2023). The explosive growth of globalisation and communication technologies has presented a nigh-impossible challenge to public service channels, which could continue to play a crucial role in nurturing the native language in the age of digital content production through undertaking the tasks of preserving, creating and transmitting values (see Antal 2022).

Nurturing the Native Language in the New Media Age

“Our native language plays a crucial role not only in the preservation of national identity but also in the formation and nurturing of Hungarian culture as well, and public media is an important mediating channel for it”, according to Dániel Papp, Director of the Médiaszolgáltatás-támogató és Vagyonkezelő Alap (Media Services and Support Trust Fund, hereafter MTVA) at the first Montágh Conference held in the autumn of 2023.

As emphasised by Nemesi (2014: 297), there is no question of unity in the language used in the media, since PSM usually follow different norms from those of commercial media, which are generally of higher quality. Moreover, one must not forget the regional or local press and the national media. Furthermore, widespread internet access and social media networks are also exercising an increasing influence on the language used in the national press, including integrating words of Anglophone origin into everyday language use.

Denis McQuail (2003: 141–42) shows that the notion of public service places citizens' collective, social needs ahead of individual rights, consumer freedom or market interests and assigns great importance to national culture, including the nurturing and preservation of the national language and identity. This attitude, which can be considered traditional in a historical sense in Hungary, appears in Act CLXXXV of 2010 on Media Services and the Mass Media. Its second point already includes among the goals of public service the nurturing and enriching of national, communal and European culture and the Hungarian language. A few points later, it lists the preservation of the native tongue of the Hungarians living outside the country's borders as a goal.

The cornerstones of nurturing the native language are contained in the *Public Service Code* (§ 96).⁷ One of the things it makes it clear is that the public service broadcaster “is aware that through its services which

⁷ https://nmhh.hu/dokumentum/168366/kozszolgalati_kodex_final.pdf

reach the broader public, it has a decisive effect on the language used in the national press and the media and therefore on the development of the vernacular; nurturing the Hungarian language is therefore one of its critical goals.” Its new shows “aim to use the Hungarian language correctly and to avoid expressions which damage and weaken the native language and unjustified abbreviations” and “to avoid the use of foreign expressions where possible and to use the vernacular Hungarian equivalents instead. Therefore, according to this guidance, public service channels aim not just to avoid errors, non-Hungarian expressions and sentence structures, but also to produce programmes that use the richness and elegance of the Hungarian language, with correct emphasis and intonation.”

However, the Information Revolution, digitalisation and the spread of social media networks, and the diminished importance of public service broadcasters at the same time, have significantly increased the difficulty of language cultivation content, such as Lajos Lőrincze’s and Imre Montágh’s programmes in the 1980s, reaching a large part of the population. While the state aims to play a visibly important role in preserving linguistic norms and establishing plain language, taking an active part in forming society and quality, the mass communication channels whose availability it could once take for granted, such as Hungarian Radio and Hungarian Television, which long enjoyed a monopoly, they have lost much of their effectiveness to the advance first of commercial television and then online content delivery and their audience has decreased with it. As Petra Aczél observed, the impact of the computer’s mediating effect has been studied since the 1970s, reaching either pessimistic or optimistic assumptions. While the research conducted at the end of the 20th century focuses on the losses, current studies and media theories prefer to discuss change when discussing communicative behaviour characteristics and norms (Aczél 2009; Arató–Balázs 2024). However, this change has significantly diluted the previously accepted language standard due to tabloidisation. Since the appearance of commercial media, the language of the tabloids has become dominant in the content, contextual characteristics and components of media coverage (see Antal 2011: 131). Regarding the differences between quality and tabloid media content, Mónika Andok (2009: 19) emphasises that although “the two forms do not rule each other out and have an overlap”, this goes in one direction. More educated media consumers are open to receiving popular media content. Still, the less educated do not possess either the requisite range of vocabulary or the interpretive framework necessary for quality media content (2009: 19).

By the early 2000s, it was already clear to experts that a thorough simplification of the news and framework was taking place in the tabloid

media's editorial boards. They increasingly featured simplified reports. The use of simple sentences became a common practice, for instance. The messages placed on tabloid media surfaces understandably aimed at being as intelligible for a mass audience as possible (see Antal 2011: 137), and the same process characterises digital social media surfaces as well. However, state PSM's scope was steadily shrinking in the ever more decentralised mass communication, with the multiplication of media channels. The culturally strongly heterogeneous range of media, now expanded with streaming services, is becoming less and less capable of cooperating in nurturing the native language and preserving quality linguistic standards.

However, not even a heterogeneous society can fall outside the remit of public service broadcasting. The values traditionally represented by public service must be harmonised with the appropriate needs of network society (cf. Castells 2005). Society still essentially informs itself about occurrences through the media. It is therefore essential for the media to cooperate in maintaining the social legitimacy necessary for the operation of the state. The Scandinavian states, notably Norway, are outstanding examples of this. It is worth mentioning here the role played by the Language Council of Norway (Språkrådet, the successor of the Norwegian Language Council, Norsk språkråd, which operated between 1974 and 2005) in cultivating the native language. The organisation's openly stated goal is to preserve the importance of the Norwegian language and linguistic diversity. This makes it one of the institutions, alongside the Norwegian Academy, which bear the brunt in the standardisation of the Norwegian language. The Language Council of Norway also cooperates with state and economic actors regarding language policy measures to make language use as understandable for the population as possible. The Norwegians' situation is made more difficult by the existence of two official forms of their language, bokmål and nynorsk, which differ significantly in numerous respects. An important stated goal of the Council, formed in 2005, is to preserve the use of linguistic variants of bokmål and nynorsk by government agencies and the quality of Norwegian language technology. It therefore ensures that language education is based on accepted language policy. It also oversees compliance with the Language Act. It carefully follows the development and spelling of the language and the maintenance of its intelligibility, which it aims to support with online dictionaries, courses, seminars and academic publications. This organisation also approves Norwegian dictionaries and glossaries published in schools.⁸

⁸ <https://sprakradet.no/Vi-og-vart/Om-oss/English-and-other-languages/English/>

A large body of academic literature is devoted to language comprehension, not just in Scandinavia. This is because the language used by public institutions, authorities, and service providers generally plays a significant role in mediating between the state and its citizens.⁹ Institutional language must, or at least should, be easily interpretable and intelligible by the general public, while conforming to legal requirements. A case in point is the clear communication of healthcare regulations during the coronavirus pandemic. Plain language is a crucial trust requirement between citizens and public institutions. The quality of communication and the intelligibility of the language play a central role in the development of citizens' attitudes towards regulations and public institutions. This topic is being assigned an increasingly important role globally, and more and more national governments are operating special programmes and systems of incentives for the continuous development of plain language (see Antal 2017).

Already in 1999, Ferenc Pusztai drew attention to the fact that the native language can only be maintained in a “working” state according to the needs of our time if it is modernised. Its range of expressions is adapted to the requirements of the present age (1999: 93). Otherwise, people who speak no foreign languages and who therefore possess only the range of expressions provided by their native language may eventually be excluded from communication on the new phenomena and situations regarding the processes of technological progress, which are primarily transmitted via the English language (cf. Michelberger 1999: 21). Native languages must therefore be capable of fully describing all areas of life, absorbing the new knowledge and concepts that appear with expressions in foreign languages and replacing them with expressions created from the native language, even in today's changed media environment. Numerous circumstances must be considered in this regard, including, for instance, that people consume online content differently from printed media and programmes on the radio and television.

Media consumers do not read with the same techniques on computer screens or smartphones as they would if they held a book or newspaper (Szűts 2012). Studies show that the average reader reads only approximately 20% of the words of a text that appear on a given website.¹⁰

The readership habits of online surfaces have therefore appeared as a new model. The lines between the content presentation forms of the radio and television, kept strictly separate for decades, have become blurred, and

⁹ <https://mki.gov.hu/en/hirek-en/minden-hir-en/lehet-e-kozertheto-a-hivatali-nyelv>

¹⁰ Source: <https://www.seattleu.edu/web/content/writing> (last downloaded on 19 February 2024).

the previously established system of quality norms has been forced into the background, all the while, regulation in the online media space has become an arduous task. However, society needs PSM to function as a reference point for language use, in a manner intelligible to the public, even amid the 21st century's remarkably rapid technological changes. The task of public service broadcasters is therefore not merely to preserve and maintain language norms but to develop intelligible communication with the citizenry, considering that in globalised society, foreign language words and expressions, as well as technical terminology—as a consequence of progress in the area of information technology—are appearing in everyday language use.

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