CHAPTER EIGHT

COMMUNICATING QUASI-CITIZENSHIP?
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN GMO-RELEASE PERMITTING PROCEDURES IN HUNGARY – A CONVERSATION ANALYTIC APPROACH*

Zsuzsanna Iványi, András Kertész and Kornélia Marinecz

A. INTRODUCTION

1. . . . on behalf of the Hungarian citizens . . .

[I myself would demand it too, and I think I say all this on behalf of the Hungarian citizens that we indeed would like to know what dangers there are, we like to know what we eat, what we are made to eat. So in any case, I believe that the community has to be involved in these things, and with their consent such laws, such regulations may be brought in, which enjoy the approval of the community] (SS/321–7)

The quotation above comes from an interview conducted with an organic farmer on the topic of biotechnology. The speaker explicitly notes that he is talking not as an individual, but on behalf of a social group he belongs to and is a representative of, namely, the Hungarian citizens. In the following statements this fact is signalled by the use of the first person plural form of the verbs. The general demand for information about the quality of food, and about possible dangers connected to them is presented to be characteristic for the group. The speaker suggests the involvement of the population as a way to satisfy this demand. Moreover, he considers legal regulations concerning the public to be subject of their consent, that is, citizens should be not only informed but also asked for opinion in the matters at issue.

This short sequence raises several questions right at the outset. Nevertheless, within the limited frames of the present study we focus only on some of them, and we do this in line with our linguistic interest,

* András Kertész’ contribution to the present paper was supported by the Research Group for Theoretical Linguistics of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences at the Universities of Debrecen, Pécs and Szeged.
at that. What we are primarily interested in is: By what communicative means are the notions and ideas of participation of the public in the process of the legal-administrative procedures constructed in communication?

To answer this question, in the present paper we will apply the technique of conversation analysis. We will show that there is a striking parallel between certain central features of present-day Hungarian society and the results of our conversation analytic investigations. In particular, the communicative means of public participation, which our conversation analytic research revealed and on which we will report, are symptoms of the social setting and, as such, reflect relevant features of the latter. Our main finding will be that communication of public participation between the government and the public as well as between the other involved parties and the public in the decision making procedures we investigated is handicapped in several respects. This exposes the existence of a very restricted kind of communicative citizenship in Hungary that we would provisionally call ‘quasi-citizenship’.

Before tackling the issues thus indicated, it would be sound to sketch some of the background assumptions that guided our research so as to clarify the key terms we are operating with. This will also allow for the specification of the basic problem of the present study.

2. Background assumptions

The central issue of public participation and social positioning in GMO-release permitting procedures in Hungary is the notion of citizen in a specific sense. Citizenship is not restricted to nationality or membership in a particular state. Rather, citizenship involves the right to participate in decision making processes, the right to being informed, and the right to act within the given legal framing (Bora and Hausendorf 2006a: 40). Accordingly, citizenship is on the one hand, not independent of the legal system of the country: on the other hand, however, it includes essentially more than the sole following of the laws in that it emerges when people are addressed as citizens by administrative bodies. Such administrative procedures of citizen participation “provide slots for people to enter the scene as citizens in the very sense of the word” (Bora and Hausendorf 2006b: 86; emphasis added). These slots can be filled by a great variety of different participatory activities during which people act as citizens in the sense mentioned, that is,