



Tuesday, June 24th, 11:45-12:15, room 101

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## **Discursive community and identity construction in 18th century Hungarian witchcraft trials**

**Keywords:** cognitive pragmatics, practice theory, witchcraft trial, community and identity construction

Witchcraft is a representative community and witch is a representative identity of Early Modern Europe, with the help of which members of village communities could resolve local conflicts and explain otherwise incomprehensible events (Gibson 1999: 8). Witches are the members of village communities who are believed to have supernatural powers and therefore can cause actual harm to others via their utterances (Culpeper–Semino 2000: 100).

This paper is concerned with a data-driven research of witchcraft as a discursively constructed community and witch as a discursively constructed identity using cognitive pragmatics and practice theory as theoretical framework. The research data consists of transcripts of three 18th century Hungarian witchcraft trials. My aim is to describe how prosecutors discursively construct witchcraft as a community and the defendants' witch identity from their own point of view.

I apply a socio-cognitive model of discursive community and identity construction (cf. Bucholtz–Hall 2005, van Dijk 2007). This approach claims that communities exist as conceptual categories or schemata in the mind of discourse participants. Furthermore, identities are characteristics of a discourse participant according to which the mental representation of this discourse participant is a member of different communities as conceptual categories. Communities and identities are created dynamically during schematisation and categorization. Discourse participants are able to make accessible and collate their knowledge of different communities and the current identities of discourse participants by their utterances.

The main conclusions are the following: 1. Prosecutors construct witchcraft and make it linguistically accessible in their indictments. 2. Prosecutors construct mental representations of the defendants by interpreting witness testimonies. Metaphors and narrative schemata play key role in their interpretations. 3. Prosecutors construct the defendants' legally valid witch identity and make it linguistically accessible in their judgments.

### **References**

1. Bucholtz, Mary–Hall, Kira 2005. *Identity and interaction: a sociocultural linguistic approach*. *Discourse Studies* 2005/4–5: 585–614.
2. Culpeper, Jonathan–Semino, Elena 2000. Constructing witches and spells: Speech acts and activity types in Early Modern England. *Journal of Historical Pragmatics* 2000/1: 97–116.



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3. van Dijk, Teun A. 2007. *Comments on Context and Conversation*. In Fairclough, Norman–Cortese, Giuseppina–Ardizzone, Patrizia (eds.): *Discourse and Contemporary Social Change*. Bern: Peter Lang. 281–316.
4. Gibson, Marion 1999. *Reading Witchcraft. Stories of Early English Witches*. London: Routledge.