

# STYLE, PERSONALISATION, AND NEGOTIATION IN INTERNET CONVERSATIONS\*

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## Abstract

*This paper analyses internet discourse — in particular, texts of internet forums. Its subject matter is stylistic variation and the role of socio-cultural components in these texts, with special emphasis on the phenomenon of personalisation, on the one hand, and language users' active and negotiation-based role in creating style, on the other.*

*The author studies stylistic variance with respect to behaviour (attitudes), situation, value, time, and relation to particular (e.g. institutionalised) language varieties, and discusses the role of personalisation, a rarely studied but important aspect of style, too. She analyses the connection between text types and style, as well as language users' active and negotiation-based style creating performance that underlies the stylistic variation of texts. It is furthermore shown how negotiation may be made explicit in discourse in various forms and to various degrees and how it is often manifested in metastylistic reflections that reveal major aspects of style and categorisations performed by the participants and highlight the importance of style itself.*

**Keywords:** socio-cultural components of style, internet discourse, forum, personalisation, negotiation, metastylistic reflection

*“We can carry on conversations in normal tone, too.”<sup>1</sup>*

## 1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to study socio-cultural constituents of style, including their most important domains and forms of manifestation in internet discourse, and in particular in forum contributions. We will especially concentrate on the dimension of **personalisation**, the interdependence of **text type and style**, and the activity of **negotiation** with respect to style. In addition to presenting examples, as well as within the examples presented, we will largely rely on **metapragmatic reflections** offered by the speakers: indications of the most important operations, aspects and distinctions with respect to affecting and perceiving style, and playing a decisive role in style-related negotiations between participants.

The primary ambition of this paper is to be a mind-opener: its aim is the application of a general theory of style (in particular, a functional cognitive approach to it) in a relatively novel area of language use and the study of a characteristic but rarely discussed aspect of

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<sup>1</sup> From a comment, source: <http://mr-moto-velorex.blogspot.com/2010/09/navratil-attila-hozzaszolasa.html>

style, the dimension of personalisation. The paper will touch on phenomena that are little studied and try to establish interrelationships among them. Such phenomena include style in internet communication, the relationship between personalisation and style, language users' negotiation activity with respect to style, and metastylistic reflections. These matters fall outside the traditional areas of stylistic research and would deserve detailed and independent study one by one. Nevertheless, it is worth investigating them in conjunction here since in that way they offer insights into aspects of style that might represent important cues for a comprehensive understanding of general stylistic theory and the way style is put to use.

### 1.1. Style and personalisation

Analysing internet forum texts we find that, although they constitute a genre that is easy to circumscribe, stylistically speaking they are fairly heterogeneous in more ways than one. Such differences will be investigated here primarily in terms of a functional cognitive approach to style, from the point of view of the **socio-cultural stratification** of style (Sandig 1986, Tolcsvai Nagy 1996, 2005). In the texts to be analysed here, one can observe stylistic variation in diverse socio-cultural dimensions: in terms of attitudes, situations, and values, as well as time and language varieties, along continua in all these domains. However, one more aspect of linguistic production that is highly important is the dimension of **personalization** (subjectivisation) that is often thematised in categorisations offered by forum participants, too, mainly in terms of the notion of "getting personal" (even though the latter is but a narrow slice of the domain of personalisation/subjectivisation).

Analysis of the sample texts, and metalinguistic reflections concerning personalisation, will witness the importance of this dimension in the functioning and perception of style. The issue of personalisation was not given particular attention in the earlier stylistic literature, although it was indirectly touched upon in connection with other concepts. In sociolinguistic approaches to matters of style, the notions of social integration and involvement (Gumperz 1982, Chafe 1982, Tannen 1984, 2007: 26) are closely related to personalisation. Cognitive linguistics directly discusses it in relation to subjectivisation (cf. Langacker 2006, 2008, Traugott 1995, Stein—Wright 1995), but it does so primarily in the context of construal or of grammaticalisation, leaving its relation to style at the periphery. Linguistically speaking, this area of phenomena is indeed best approached in terms of **subjectivisation**, that is, variability between more subjective and more objective ways of representation; the study of texts and metalinguistic reflections of language users, however, suggest that such variability, primarily involved in alternatives of attention, functions in many cases as an important element of style.

In what follows, then, I will study personalisation (subjectivisation) as a dimension of stylistic analysis. I will take **degree of subjectivity** to be a **property of texts** that is **connected primarily with direction-of-attention choices of the text creator during construal** and that **can be evaluated along a continuum between highly objective and highly subjective**. With respect to the degree of subjectivisation, differences of **viewpoint relationships** are a dominant factor: whether the utterance has a neutral vantage point or whether the centre of reference (that is, the viewpoint of the actual speaker and/or addressee) is directly represented (Tátrai 2005), and if it is, how much **explicitness** is given to the actual speaker or addressee or (primarily sub-

jective) contents directly related to them. In my approach, the degree of subjectivisation/personalization grows with that of the explicit occurrence and elaboration of the feelings or opinions of the actual speaker or addressee(s) in the text<sup>2</sup> (cf. Vis, Sanders—Spooren 2010, 2011<sup>3</sup>). Thus, of the examples below, (1a) is more personalised than (1b) would be, due to the direct occurrence of conceptualisation in the 1sg verbal suffix and the signature, addressee-oriented speech acts (greeting, taking leave), and the exclamation mark that enhances emotionality:

- (1a) Szia!  
Köszönöm a részletes leírást és képeket!  
Üdv.  
eragka<sup>4</sup>  
'Hi, / Thank you for the detailed description and the pictures. / Best, / eragka.'
- (1b) \* Köszönet a részletes leírásért és a képekért. \*  
'Many thanks for the detailed descriptions and the pictures.'

As this example shows, the dimension of personalisation may be elaborated at the levels of a number of diverse linguistic variables (viewpoint structure, sentence type, speech act, utterance length, emoticons, etc.), and the degree of subjectivisation is directly related not only to viewpoint but also to other aspects of text creation like choices concerning explicitness/inclusiveness and thematic phenomena. Such aspects further include the presence or absence of saying hello or other forms of salutation, another important component of style in the case of a comment.

## 1.2. Personalisation in forum conversations

The analysis of forum discourse gives us a good opportunity to study personalisation as a stylistic device, given that subjectivity is an important factor in this genre. This is closely related to pragmatic and text typological peculiarities of these texts.

Conversations carried on via internet forums take place in a peculiar social-psychological and pragmatic setting: their most important feature is the fact that the participants are mutually unidentifiable and unfamiliar to one another. Hence, the communicative situation involves the non-availability of contextual background knowledge that is so important in face-to-face communication due to direct encounter, personal familiarity, and other factors of the situation (identity markers, social roles, etc.). Internet communication is characterised by impersonality in other respects, too, including electronic technology as the medium of communication; lack of direct visual and acoustic feedback; unidirectional flow of information; delayed reaction; as well as the possibility of neglecting some contributions or of a unilateral interruption of com-

<sup>2</sup> This approach is partly connected with Langacker's work who connects the phenomenon of subjectivity with operations of construal and viewpoint — cf. "for me... the terms pertain to vantage point (a matter of construal)" (Langacker 2006: 18, cf. also 2008: 77) —, but I use the notion of personalisation and of its increase in a way that is not reconcilable with the Langackerian notion of subjectivisation.

<sup>3</sup> "Subjectivity is considered here as the expression of the speaker of himself and his own 'private states', such as attitudes, beliefs, opinions, emotions and evaluations. Our model of subjectivity includes elements such as personal pronouns (first and second person), modal verbs and modal adverbials" (Vis, Sanders—Spooren 2011: 1).

<sup>4</sup> [http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na\\_start=90&na\\_step=30&t=9097176&na\\_order=](http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na_start=90&na_step=30&t=9097176&na_order=)

munication (cf. Thurlow et al. 2004: 48, Herring 2001: 4, Walther 1996). On the other hand, participants have their communicative and social needs in this situation, too (cf. “communication imperative”; Thurlow—Brown 2003). Hence, elaboration and maintenance of the interpersonal and personal dimensions via the remaining channels of communication becomes especially important, primarily as far as language use, including especially style — that is, linguistic “orchestration” — is concerned. In addition, or as part of the above, extra typographical possibilities (e.g. capital letters, emoticons, cf. Herring 2001: 11) are also exploited. In most internet text types, the following factors become eminently important: the individual’s **linguistic self-representation**, identity formation, **impression strategies** exploiting possibilities of visual and linguistic **formulation**, as well as linguistic devices of creating/modifying **interpersonal relationships** between participants in the virtual community space of the discourse. Special factors of the communicative situation, then, may lead in this genre to the upgrading of personalisation and the interpersonal aspect; in some cases, even to its over-development (cf. “hyperpersonal interaction”; Walther 1996); and the way language is used is given a dominant role in all this.

Furthermore, an important aspect of internet communication is its high degree of freedom and also licentiousness. The lack of physical encounter, namelessness/facelessness and unlimited possibility to quit the situation decrease the **validity of social norms** observed in direct personal communication to a significant extent and, as a consequence, verbal aggression and exaggerated display of emotions may grow, and polarisation and radicalisation become typical (cf. Thurlow et al. 2004: 62). Weakening of social norms also contributes to a more liberal display of speaker subjectivity, as well as to the foregrounding of interactionality and the interpersonal aspect of language use.

On the other hand, within internet communication, and even within the use of forums, a variety of text types and subtypes do exist, their style exhibits wide variety/variability, and the degree of personalisation varies, too. This is closely connected to what the actual topic of discourse is within a given forum; the primary aim and participant structure of the actual “speech event”, the central theme (if any), and the way conversation gets organised around it. When we study their style, it is important to pay attention to such pragmatic, text typological, and interaction-internal social factors in the analysis of forum texts.

### 1.3. Texts of forums and topics: text type, style, and style formation

Internet communication includes a variety of discourse and text types (e.g. forum, comment, email, chat, blog, community sites) behind which we find diverse interaction structures, distinct participant roles and expectations, and a variety of communicative aims, whereby they are also rather varied in stylistic terms, too. The present paper concentrates on a single major type of discourse, **forum texts**, partly extending its attention to the neighbouring genre of **comments**, where opinions on a given topic (news item, or event) exhibit a sequentiality that makes them rather similar to forum-type conversations. The material primarily comes from forums of the largest forum community of Hungary called Index, and from texts of some other forums and series of comments (NOL, MNO, portfolio.hu and YouTube); these discourse samples are close to everyday conversations and their style-forming activities, but they also represent the stylistic variability and stylistic features of the genre of forums.

Stylistic features of forum texts are closely related to text typological and interactional

characteristics of these texts. The close links among genres, norms, and style, as well as social interaction, text types and stylistic patterns are widely discussed in the literature (Hymes 1974: 57; Sandig 1972: 123, 1986: 173; Eöry 1986: 132). These papers present the way various activities may be associated with a given communicative situation, involving various socio-cultural norms, pieces of knowledge, and expectations, and accordingly various action patterns, text and style patterns, on the basis of experience in language use, in the language users' minds. The interrelationship between situation and text type (aka genre) and style is non-obligatory in nature (cf. Hámori 2007), although several text types — due to the characteristics of the situation in which those texts usually occur — are typically linked to some style type (e.g., records of evidence, obituaries, gossips).

The text type of forums is not linked to a given style type but **general knowledge, expectations and norms** pertaining to internet and conversational styles and patterns of verbal behaviour do play an important role in the way they work. Such norms represent a relatively loose framework within which significant stylistic differences may arise in the individual topics: that is, a wide scope of action is left for **participants' dynamic style formation and negotiation** (cf. “styling”, Coupland 2007, Eckert 2010; adaptation and negotiation, Verschueren 1999: 60); on the other hand, some principles are valid across topics with an almost universal status.

The most important common feature of internet forum texts and comments<sup>5</sup> is that they arise from a series of utterances organised around a narrower or wider topic in the framework of open communication of several participants and are very close, in the way they work, to everyday conversations with several contributors. This is referred to in metalinguistic reflections by the participants who often refer to their own communication, despite its written form, as “conversation” or “talking” (e.g. *Tudunk mi normális hangnemben is társalogni*<sup>6</sup> ‘We can carry on conversations in normal tone, too’, *meg kéne tanulni kulturáltan társalogni még az ilyen témákról is*<sup>7</sup> ‘we should learn how to talk in a civilised manner even about topics like this’).

Some stylistic expectations pertaining to forum texts are present and make their presence felt in an **implicit** manner in operations of text production and interpretation by language users just like expectations concerning everyday conversations intuitively acquired in the course of normal practice (cf. Thurlow et al. 2004: 65). Others, however, are formulated as **explicit rules** — a significant difference from oral conversations. During the fifteen years or so of the existence of internet so far, several fundamental communicative principles have taken shape concerning language use via internet, and some of these are explicitly formulated, especially in “netiquettes” that contain basic norms of internet communication (see Hambridge 1995, Négyesi 1998, Domonkosi 1999), or in regulations issued by service providers who operate internet platforms (e.g. “Forum Rules”<sup>8</sup>). Some further rules are laid down by moderators who supervise forums. Hence, forum/comment texts come into being under the special situational circumstances of the internet and in a stylistically peculiar pragmatic space in which a **high degree of language users' freedom** is combined with **continuous external linguistic control**.

<sup>5</sup> In terms of text typological properties, online chat is rather similar to these genres; the boundaries between these text types are not clear-cut. However, chat is a genre that is emphatically informal, often intimate, and more homogeneous in terms of style and structure. The present analyses will not be extended to it.

<sup>6</sup> <http://mr-moto-velorex.blogspot.com/2010/09/navratil-attila-hozzaszolasa.html>

<sup>7</sup> <http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?go=77931526&t=9121967>

<sup>8</sup> E.g.: <http://forum.index.hu/Custom/showDisclaimer>, <http://www.ebay-forum.hu/index.php?app=forums&module=extras&section=boardrules>

In this special pragmatic context, the openness, initiative style creation, and negotiation-based flexibility that normally characterise spontaneous oral conversations and are based on intuitively acquired and implicitly present stylistic patterns are observable to a large extent. Such openness is increased by the communicative situation already referred to, especially the anonymity of the users; and precisely due to that openness and anonymity, users' active style formation and negotiation acquires a special role. The anonymity and lack of identifiability of text creators lends extra significance to the manner of text formulation, i.e. to style: in this situation, it becomes a primary tool of the individual's self-representation (cf. "speakers' linguistic performance as a continual construction of a persona", Eckert 2004: 41, Coupland 2007, Eckert 2010). In view of the facelessness and anonymity of the internet, the degree and linguistic implementation of **personalisation** is an especially relevant issue.

On the other hand, forum conversations are also regulated by explicit principles. Some of these directives — primarily constraints and prohibitions — are associated with legal consequences (e.g. the ban on illegal comments), others, however, are clearly of a linguistic nature. Some of the latter serve the maintenance of the general operability of discourse, like the ban on offtopic comments, repetitions, or too lengthy contributions; while many of them specifically refer to the style of discourse, primarily in the form of restrictions (e.g. the ban on "rude, obscene, vulgar", "aggressive", or "offensively personal" tone), showing the eminent importance of style in this area of language use. Compliance with these regulations is checked by outside norm guards or moderators who may directly sanction violations of such principles or expectations, among other things, by restricting the participation of the given language user in the current discourse and, in the case of repeated infringement, by excluding him/her from the community of contributors, and even by deleting his/her virtual personality (username or nick).

But the existence of such regulations and moderation do not put an end to stylistic negotiation to be performed by the participants. What is more, the two areas, external censorship and implicit self-control are interlocked at several points: both in an institutional manner (forum contributors themselves may act as moderators) and individually, given that commenters often refer to the forum regulations or to moderators during their own style forming activity, sometimes even directly addressing the latter.

The rules given in forum regulations work as norms rather than real constraints: within them, a relatively wide scope of action is left for users who mould their style actively, in accordance with their individual aims and in cooperation with their partners. This cooperation is partly materialised in involuntary and/or implicit adaptations (cf. style accommodation and divergence; Giles et al. 1991, Bartha—Hámori 2010), and partly in acts of negotiation accompanied by explicit signals, where participants' metastylistic reflections and instructions play an eminent role.

The following section analyses the most important varieties of the style of forums and the style forming activity of their participants on the basis of major dimensions of the socio-cultural stratification of style, and introduces the dimension of personalisation and its main variants. The second half of the paper, subsequently, discusses the active operation of styling, the characteristic forms of stylistic negotiation, and some basic possibilities of metalinguistic reflections.

## 2. Socio-cultural dimensions of style in forum and comment texts

Style is the way language is used; but it is also "a manner of activity relevant from a social

point of view” (Sandig 1986: 23); variations in that manner of activity are produced by language users while they link symbolic structures of language with social meaning during producing and interpreting verbal interactions embedded in a context of social and cultural factors (Tolcsvai Nagy 2005: 90). That socio-cultural stratification of style can be accounted for in several ways: linguistic analyses, generally in line with “popular” style specifications of language users (cf. Tolcsvai Nagy 2005: 17, Sandig 1986: 23), mainly start from the relationship of the language user to his/her speech partner, to text formulation, to the subject-matter or to the situation (Szathmári 1994, Sandig 1986: 22, Tolcsvai Nagy 2005: 92). On the basis of those factors, style variants can be arranged along the dimensions of **behaviour** (attitude), **situation**, and **value**, among others; and their relation to **time** and to characteristic (e.g. institutional, geographical) **language varieties** may also be relevant (Tolcsvai Nagy 1996, 2005: 92). Along with those dimensions, another important factor is the domain of **personalisation**, often exhibiting close interrelations with some of the above variables.

Although each dimension can be explored on its own, it appears that changes in one dimension of style often show typical co-occurrences with those in another dimension, thus producing characteristic **style types** or “**protostyles**”. The latter are closely connected with thematic issues, with text subtypes within the general genre of forum texts, and with the current aims of participants of conversations. Protostyles occur as important results of the active style shaping moves of the interlocutors and their dynamic adaptation to new ways of communication, while they also serve as new stylistic models for conversations going on in forums, departing from earlier style patterns and norms and continuously overwriting them. The phenomenon of protostyles will be further discussed in the last part of the present paper. But first, let us survey the main types of variance observable in the dimensions just mentioned — in those of behaviour, situation, value, time, and language varieties —, with the help of a few examples. Although style changes are mainly represented by lexical choices in those examples, this has only reasons to do with economy of presentation: style can show up in various domains of text creation in the case of forum texts, too, as can be observed in some of the examples in grammar, orthography, punctuation, idiomatic constructions (greetings), and even in text formulation (forms of address, saying goodbye, paragraph organisation) and arrangement of the vehicle (capitalisation, bold type, layout).

### **2.1. The variability of style in terms of behaviour, situation, value, time, and language varieties**

The style variable of **behaviour** (or attitude) can be primarily characterised with the values vulgar—familiar—neutral—elaborate; it can refer to the speaker’s behaviour towards the addressee (e.g. polite, supercilious, or confidential) or the speaker’s relationship to text formulation (Tolcsvai Nagy 2005: 93). Mediated by his/her attitude to linguistic choices, this dimension of style may directly reflect on the speaker’s attitude to the speech partner on the one hand, and may play an important role in the elaboration of the speaker’s discursive identity or self-representation, on the other (Bartha—Hámori 2010: 315—316).

Forum texts exhibit significant variability in terms of this stylistic variable: we often find comments whose style is familiar (2a) or indeed vulgar or rude (2b); but we can also find utterances that are stylistically neutral (2c) or polite and elaborate (2d, e).

- (2a) Bubu tökre eltűnt, és lécci ha látod mondd meg neki, hogy puszilom. :-)<sup>9</sup>  
 ‘Bubu has completely disappeared; if you see him tell him I send my kisses. ☺’
- (2b) Te nemcsak buzi vagy, hanem elmebeteg is. Na meg álparaszt. De valódi seggfej.<sup>10</sup>  
 ‘You’re not only a geek but also an idiot. And a fake boor. But a real shithead.’
- (2c) Mert nem kell bejelenteni a lakcímváltozást, azt a központiból kéri le. Nekünk is simán átírták maguktól. Tehát az illető valószínűleg a lakcímnyilvántartásban is rossz címmel szerepel.<sup>11</sup>  
 ‘Because you don’t have to report your change of address, it will be accessed from the central data base. They simply changed it for us, too. The guy must be misrepresented in the registry of addresses, too.’
- (2d) Sziasztok! Egy olyan kérdésem lenne, ami már egyszer elhangzott régebben, de csak francia válasz érkezett rá, amit én sajnos nem értek. A válasz azonban érdekel. Légións felvonulásokon lehet látni, hogy egyes légiónsok egyfajta bőrmellényt viselnek és kalapácsot tartanak a kezükben. Valaki meg tudná mondani, hogy ez mit jelent? Köszí a választ, Tisztelettel.<sup>12</sup>  
 ‘Hi everybody, I have a question that has been asked before but only a French reply came that I don’t understand. But I’m interested. You can see in legionnaires’ marches that some of them wear a kind of leather waistcoats and hold hammers in their hands. Could somebody tell me what this means? Thanks in advance, best wishes.’
- (2e) Szerinted nem lett volna jóval elegánsabb, civilizáltabb, tiszteletreméltóbb (és lehetne még mondani pár jelzőt) dolog élve elfogni, bíróság elé állítani és nyilvánosan a fejére olvasni a bűneit, mint így orvul meggyilkolni a családjá körében? Valószínűleg lett volna mondanivalója a bírák és a világ színe előtt, amit az amerikai vezetés nem akart hallani. Elképzelhető, hogy több lett volna egyszerű Amerika-ellenes propagandánál, agitációnál. És a világ is jobban odafigyelt volna.<sup>13</sup>

‘Don’t you think it would have been more elegant, more civilised, more venerable (and some further adjectives could be added) to catch him alive, commit him for trial and publicly take him to task for his crimes than to kill him so, on the sly, for his whole family to see?’

He would probably have had things to say to his judges and to the world, things that the American leaders would have preferred not to hear. Probably, it would have been more than mere anti-US propaganda or intrigue. And the world would have listened more carefully.’

<sup>9</sup> <http://forum.portfolio.hu/topic.php?t=7888&limit=20&order=0&from=13920>

<sup>10</sup> [http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na\\_start=86453&na\\_step=30&t=9111932&na\\_order=](http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na_start=86453&na_step=30&t=9111932&na_order=)

<sup>11</sup> <http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?t=9127144&la=109247735>

<sup>12</sup> [http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na\\_start=5200&na\\_step=200&t=9007801&na\\_order=](http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na_start=5200&na_step=200&t=9007801&na_order=)

<sup>13</sup> [http://nol.hu/archivum/mit\\_szedett\\_bin\\_laden\\_#kommentek](http://nol.hu/archivum/mit_szedett_bin_laden_#kommentek)



In these examples, we can also observe the direct relationship between linguistic formulation and the speaker's attitude to the addressee (2a, b, d) or the speaker's self-representation (2e).

It is worth making a digression on utterances or expressions that can be stylistically labelled “**vulgar**” or “**rude**”.<sup>14</sup> This stylistic phenomenon is fairly frequent in these genres of internet communication, in spite of the fact that such expressions tend to count as taboo as per standard norms and are expressly prohibited by most internet forum regulations. However, language users often disregard such norms and explicit prohibitions; hence, in the norm of internet communication vulgarity-related taboos (just like e.g. orthographic rules) tend to be reevaluated and vulgarity may become the **norm** in certain cases. It was observed during our analyses that vulgar or rude expressions did not only occur in topics/comments of diverse kinds but also in several different functions. The use of rude expressions in texts carried a variety of social meanings: sometimes it constituted an **act of verbal aggression**, but another prototypical function turned out to be the indication of interpersonal closeness, **familiarity**, **friendliness**, and/or **solidarity**. Finally, the use of rude or vulgar expressions may primarily be a tool of the speaker's **self-characterisation**, self-representation: in such cases, vulgar or taboo-breaking expressions represent the quality of being “cool”, casual, “sharp”, or, in some cases, they represent power (masculinity), and iconically stand for neglecting some social norms or rules (Coates 2004: 98, cf. also Bartha—Hámori 2010: 316).

Another stylistic domain, that of **situation**, conceptualises the speaker's representation of the current speech situation; here we can observe various degrees of formality—informality. In this respect, our forum texts and comments showed far less variability: the appearance of formal style is very infrequent, almost exceptional in them, most of them cannot even be said to be neutral; most texts are characterised by some degree of **informality** (3a).

This is primarily due to the informal communicative situation in which forum and comment texts are produced (but the overall informality of the stylistic norm typical of internet communication in general may also have a role). More formal contributions are normally only made in forums of official institutions (e.g. (3b)). Increased formality is also characteristic of topics in which one of the participants has an institutional(ised) role (e.g. moderator, doctor, or lawyer). For instance:

- (3a) Bubu tökre eltűnt, és lécci ha látod mondd meg neki, hogy puszilom. :-)<sup>15</sup>  
‘Bubu has completely disappeared; if you see him tell him I send my kisses. ©’

- (3b) Tisztelt Fórumtársak!  
További helyreigazítást tennék a 208 milliós ingatlan eladáshoz: az „eredményezett” szó helyére, az eredményezhet szó a helyes fogalmazás, tekintettel arra a tényre, hogy az ügy még nem befejezett.  
Szíves megértésüket köszönöm!<sup>16</sup>

‘Dear Forum Partners,  
I would like to add a further correction concerning the 208-million real estate trans-

<sup>14</sup> This is not identical with the far wider topic of verbal aggression via the internet (cf. e.g. Thurlow et al. 2004: 69—75).

<sup>15</sup> <http://forum.portfolio.hu/topic.php?t=7888&limit=20&order=0&from=13920>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.freeforum.hu/nagykovacsi/topik/12206,3>

action: instead of the word “has yielded”, the correct expression is “may yield”, in view of the fact that the case is not yet closed.

Thank you for your kind understanding.’

(source: the webpage of the local authority of Nagykovácsi)

In the linguistic elaboration of formality, forms of greeting and of address have a crucial role (Domonkosi 2002). In addition, other lexical, grammatical (e.g. passive constructions), and text typological choices are also important: among the last-mentioned type, it is primarily the presence or lack of salutation, greeting, and leave-taking that contribute to the regulation of formal stylistic value. In Hungarian, a prominent role is also played by formal/informal 2sg forms (*te* vs. *maga* vs. *Őn*): the use of formal varieties leads to an increase in the level of formality.

Given that in the norms of internet communication informal 2sg forms are in general use, this contributes to the fact that the style of forum texts is also shifted towards informality. Another factor resulting in a decrease of formality is that, due to the similarity between forum communication and spoken discourse, typically casual and/or **spoken-language items** (discourse markers, interjections) and grammatical constructions often occur there in writing.

On the other hand, one thing that makes the evaluation of a stylistic variable difficult is that a given linguistic construction often carries its meaning in characteristic **co-occurrences** with other stylistic domains, rather than in itself. In addition, the stylistic **heterogeneity** of the texts under examination also increases the difficulties: the style structure of a given contribution is not necessarily homogeneous even in terms of a single stylistic domain, thus formal and informal or elaborate and casual items often occur next to one another.

The following important stylistic dimension is that of **value**. Here, a contribution can be value-depriving, neutral, and value-saturating; in this dimension, the language user elaborates his/her personal attitude to, or evaluation of, the topic, the situation, or sometimes the addressee, and hence this domain shows a close relationship with the dimension of attitude. In forum and comment texts, along with neutral solutions, we often find value-depriving expressions (that are often rude/vulgar at the same time). Most of these are due to the **informality** already referred to, as well as to the familiar style used towards the addressee. In this context, in one of the characteristically occurring types, value-depriving expressions characterize the speaker’s relationship to the situation or the topic and are part of his/her **self-representation** (as cool, casual, sharp). For instance:

(3c) *emelem a poharat a pofámhoz*<sup>17</sup>

‘I raise my glass to **my yap**’

Another important function of value-depriving stylistic devices is **characterisation of the topic** of the utterance and an implicit elaboration of the speaker’s **opinion of that topic**:

(4) Arra azért kíváncsi lennék, hogy ki lehetett ennek a vecsési **álcivil** alapítványocskának a zuglói **ügynöke**, aki ezt a **röhejes** **luftbalmot** felfújta.

Nekem egyébként **tökmindegy**, hogy ki kinek a szekerét tolja, boldog tudatlanság-

<sup>17</sup> <http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?go=104434360&t=9157953>

ban, megkockáztatom, merő jószándékból. Viszont nem lennék meglepve, ha ez a civil **nő** hamarosan MSZP **kvótanővé** válnék.<sup>18</sup>

‘I would like to know who might have been the **agent** in Zugló of this **pseudo-civil mini-fund** of Vecsés who blew up this **ridiculous toy balloon**.

I really **don’t care** who is whose toady in happy ignorance, I daresay out of mere goodwill. But I would not be surprised if this civil **woman** soon turned into a **quota-woman** of the Socialist Party.’

Value-deprivation may also often concern the **addressee** and be part of the contributor’s **verbal aggression** (similarly to the use of vulgar expressions). Again, numerous examples can be found:

(5) Maradj inkább a nőklapja oldalon, remekül érezheted ott magad a **hasonszórúéek** között. **Szánalmas vagy**.

Valakinek jó **kupán** kéne vágnia, hogy **helyre billenjen** az agyad, ha egyáltalán ez lehetséges.<sup>19</sup>

‘Stay in that women’s-weekly webpage, you may feel superb among **birds of a feather**. You’re **pathetic**.

Someone should **bash** you on the head so that your brain should **get patched up**, if that is at all possible.’

In this example, aggression is conveyed with no rude expressions at all, exclusively with the help of value-depriving choices.

Of course, we can also find value-saturating linguistic choices in the texts of forums and comments. For instance:

(6) Egyrészt nagyon szomorú ez az egész, de nekem **rengeteget** segít, hogy olyan emberekkel oszthatom meg a **legbelsőbb** félelmeimet, szorongásaimat és örömeimet is akik tudják, hogy min megyek keresztül, hogy **gyermekem** lehessen! Szóval, hogy hogyan lehet ezt túlélni? Nehezen, de mi mindig itt leszünk és ha kell **lelket öntünk** beléd! Mert hidd el sikerülni fog. Addig meg nekem az segített, hogy az életem más területein értem el sikereket, eredményeket és ezek **boldoggá tettek**. Körülöttem is sokan lettek **babások**, így szeretgethettek az ő **babáikat**. **Szép estét kívánok neked!!!** Üdv: Bmmb<sup>20</sup>

‘First, this whole thing is very sad, but it helps me **an awful lot** to be able to share my **innermost** fears, anxieties and joys with people who know what I am going through in order to **have a baby!** Well, how can one survive this? Difficult, but we will always be here and if necessary we will **put heart into** you! Believe me, you will succeed. In the meantime, what helped me was that I had successes in other areas of life and those **made me happy**. Many around me **had their own babies** and I was able to hug their **babies** whenever I wanted. **I wish you a very nice evening!** Best, Bmmb’

<sup>18</sup> <http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?t=9046017>

<sup>19</sup> [http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na\\_start=148&na\\_step=30&t=9063241&na\\_order=](http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na_start=148&na_step=30&t=9063241&na_order=)

<sup>20</sup> [http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na\\_start=846&na\\_step=30&t=9006100&na\\_order=](http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na_start=846&na_step=30&t=9006100&na_order=)

It is an interesting phenomenon within the dimension of value that a certain stylistic value often “turns round” and fulfils an ironical function in the discourse, against expectations. Thus, **value-saturating choices** often occur in a **value-depriving function**, e.g.:

- (7) Szeretném nagy-nagy mélységes tisztelettel és alázattal megtudni, ki volt az aranyos, drága, jó, szeretetreméltó, bölcs és okos (pol)moderátor, aki megcsinálta az, hogy ha topicot nyitok, akkor annak csak a címe marad meg, a cím kereshető is, de a topic valójában automatikusan törlődött és nem létezik!?!?<sup>21</sup>

‘I would like to ask with great deep reverence and humility who that charming, dear, good, amiable, wise and clever (pol)moderator was who did it. When I open a topic, only the title remains and the title can even be searched, but the topic in fact was automatically deleted and does not exist.’

The same thing applies the other way round: **value-deprivation**, in some cases, especially in linguistic marking of interpersonal relationships toward the addressee, is linked with the speaker’s confidential, **positive, value-saturating** attitude (similarly to some cases where rude expressions are used):

- (8) Mi itt vagyunk, itt leszünk, elérhetőek vagyunk, az oké, hogy a kaja-para miatt találtunk egymásra, de ettől függetlenül is itt vagyunk már! A többi miatt aggódjanak a szüleid, némileg az ő felelősségük, hogy meggyógyulj [...]. Érted, kiscsaj? Mit uगतok én itt a bizalomról, amikor bennem is ott motoszkál, hogy mivan ha igazából nem számítana, ha nem írnék ide többet, sose keresnének többet.<sup>22</sup>  
‘We are here and will be here, we are accessible, OK, fine, we have found each other because of our food fright, but we are here all the same! As for the rest, let your parents worry, it’s partly their responsibility to have you recover [...]. See, little bird?’

What do I bark here of confidence, when it keeps running through my head what if it did not really matter, if I did not write here anymore, no one would look for me anymore.’

The dimension of **time** exhibits less variability in the style of forum texts than the former components of style; and it fails to occur in metalinguistic reflections, too. Nevertheless, this dimension has its significance as well. Texts are usually neutral in this respect, but they often include novel expressions, neologisms (cf. Sólyom, this volume). This is partly due to the novelty of the form and medium of communication concerned, and partly to the age of users (as they are typically young). Sometimes this also reflects the topic under discussion, but novel expressions also have an important role in referring to the identity and relations of language users.

The innovative nature of the form and setting of communication (internet, informatics) accounts for the use of expressions like *modi* ‘moderator’, *moderátor* ‘id.’, *banner* ‘id.’, *regelni* ‘to reg(ister)’, *fölmegy a netre* ‘go on the net’, etc. The words *fórum* ‘forum’, *topik* ‘topic’, *nick* ‘username’ are also newcomers in the Hungarian lexicon. The use of these (often in conjunc-

<sup>21</sup> <http://forum.index.hu/Article/viewArticle?a=33791719&t=9032338>

<sup>22</sup>

tion with other casual or informal stylistic devices) may also be related to the function of style indicating or producing **group identity**. The use of neologisms, furthermore, is often mixed with individual innovations and hapaxes and may constitute an important element of the speaker's **self-representation** by elaborating the notion of being modern, young, or being an expert, one of "those in the know"; or, linked with individual coinages, by representing **creativity** or **humour**.

Finally, **certain language varieties** occurring in forum texts are also an important dimension of their style. In this respect, various occupational registers are relevant (9a), as well as varieties characteristic of certain smaller groups of speakers like the language of soldiers, car enthusiasts, sports fans, or young speakers' slang (9b). Some of these language varieties are associated with the **subject-matter of the given topic** and the relevant register (e.g. repair of electric installations, medical or financial counselling forums). But the use of these does not (only) automatically follow from the given topic; they can also function as defining participants' **roles and relationships** and/or **self-characterisations** (e.g. the use of medical terms as linguistic presentation of a competent expert, cf. (9a)). Certain occupational registers are often used to signal the speaker's belonging to the given **occupational community**, his/her **group identity** (9b). A third characteristic type is the use of **slang** that is an important tool of group identity and self-characterisation even without any thematic link (9c).

- (9a) Orvos: Véleményem szerint nyelőcső-motilitási zavara lehet, diótörő-nyelőcső vagy nem koordinált nyelőcsőkontrakciók.<sup>23</sup>

'Doctor: In my opinion, you may have oesophageal motility problems, nutcracker-oesophagus or uncoordinated oesophageal contractions.'

- (9b) Gabazo01: Persze hogy lehet! Tavaly egy P88-asból durrogtattam, Umával, de már az első lövésnél akadás volt! Asztán újra próbáltam, megint akadás! Hát mondom akkor mi lesz a gázzal? Be raktam PV-t, mint az álom! Hát mondom ez most,,? Utána elő vettem egy másik doboz Uma riogatót, na azzal már akadás mentesen kiment a tár! Úgyhogy bármilyen előfordulhat!<sup>24</sup>

Gabazo01: Of course you can! Last year I bang-banged a P88 with Uma, but it got stuck already on the first shot! Then I tried again, stuck again! So I say what with the gas? I put in PV, goes like a dream! So I say and now...? Then I opened another box of Uma startler, well then the whole stock went without getting stuck! So anything can happen.'

- (9c) A csaj tuti hogy dilis, de a zenéje hallgatható<sup>25</sup>

'The chick is nuts for sure, but her music can be listened to.'

## 2.2. Aspects of being personal in the elaboration of style

The general significance of the aspect of **personalisation** in language and style has already been pointed out in the introduction of this paper. The degree of involvement of participants in a discourse, the extent to which their presence or (primarily subjective) contents related to them are elaborated in the text, can best be defined in terms of **personalisation** or the notions

<sup>23</sup> [http://www.gyomoreges.hu/orvos-valaszol/?wm\\_search\\_pageno=2](http://www.gyomoreges.hu/orvos-valaszol/?wm_search_pageno=2)

<sup>24</sup> [http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na\\_start=30&na\\_step=30&t=9200240&na\\_order=](http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na_start=30&na_step=30&t=9200240&na_order=)

<sup>25</sup> <http://forum.portfolio.hu/topic.php?t=7888&limit=20&order=0>

of **subjectivisation vs. objectification**. In the forum texts and comments we have studied, style exhibited variance not only in the domains discussed in the foregoing, but also with respect to personalisation. The importance of that aspect of style is shown not only by this high degree of variability but also by the fact that more strongly personalized portions of discourse often become the subject-matter of metastylistic reflections and negotiation, indicating that this feature of texts is interpreted by the participants themselves as an important aspect of style. The following examples illustrate the most important variations in the domain of personalisation.

High degree of personalisation can be observed in this example:

(10a) Biobogar: Sziaa :-)

Jááj ez a Macskafogóóból a dögös nóta. :-)

Minden a legnagyobb rendben :-) A munkábaállítás, ovi és egyetemkezdéssel karöltve felér egy idegösszeomlással, de már rátaláltam a ritmusa, látod netezem, is... :-)

(Csak Bubu kedvéért: az ovit a gyerekek kezdték az egyetemet én. :-))

Te hogy vagy?

Hogy megy a tőzsde?

‘Hi :) / Vow, this is the cool song from Cat City :) / Everything is quite all right :) Starting a new job, nursery, and university simultaneously is equivalent to a nervous breakdown but I have got the rhythm already, you see, I’m using the net, too... :) / (For Bubu’s sake: nursery was started by the kids, university by me. :) / How are things at your end? How is the stock exchange going?’

Similarly high degree of personalisation characterises the reply:

(10b) Bodza: [link](#) ..itt a másik változat :)

Egyetemkezés???. ezt nem is tudtam..

ovit megszokta mindenki?..nincs sírás?

Jól vagyok köszönöm :))

Tőzsde is jól van.. és van mikor együtt is jól vagyunk :))

Máskor ne tűnj el ilyen sok időre.. Egy-egy kávészünet csak akad:))

Felelős vagy már a topik zenei neveléséért:))<sup>26</sup>

‘[link](#) ... here’s the other version :) / Starting university? I didn’t know... / Everybody happy with nursery? No crying? / I’m fine, thanks :) / Stock exchange is fine, too... and sometimes we are fine together :) / Don’t disappear again for such a long time... Coffee break occurs here and there, doesn’t it :) / You are already in charge of music education in this topic :)’

In these texts, personalisation is elaborated in several linguistic domains: in viewpoint structure, in sentence types (interrogatives) and speech acts (greetings), in emoticons and punctuation referring to emotions, as well as directly, thematically. Contributors give information about themselves, including their own mental and emotional states, and show interest in their discourse partner, ask questions, and refer back to their partner’s contribution.

<sup>26</sup> <http://forum.portfolio.hu/topic.php?t=7888&limit=20&order=0&from=13920>

The following, somewhat more formal excerpt also shows a high degree of subjectivity:

- (11) Vike24: Kedves Mindenki! Végre **vettem a bátorságot**, hogy én is írjak nektek! (Remélem, az idősebbek is megengedik a tegezést :) és **nem harag-szanak meg érte.**)

‘Dear All, I finally **took the liberty** of writing to you. (I hope the older ones of you let me address them as ‘te’ © and **do not get offended.**)

margitmama: Vike24! **Szeretettel üdvözöllek** a mi nagy családunkban! Tegezz csak nyugodtan nálunk ez a szokás! **Érezd magad nagyon jól.** margitmama.<sup>27</sup>

‘Vike24, **I greet you with all my heart** in our big family. Just address us in the informal way; this is how it is done with us. **Have a great time.** margitmama’

Personalisation appears here, along with the centre of reference, primarily in the exposition of internal — mental and emotional — states by both the explicit contents and by the use of punctuation and emoticons. The elaboration of the emotional layer of the interaction is carried on in the reply. It can be noted that, although the stylistic domain of emotionality (also important from a stylistic point of view) is not the same as that of personalisation, the two areas of phenomena are very closely related to one another (cf. Stein 1995).

In other samples of topic texts, the other end of the continuum of personalisation, its “zero degree” can be observed: the contribution is detached from the spatial and temporal coordinates of the current speaker, the personality of the speaker (conceptualiser) or his/her relationship to the context or to the propositional content is not marked in the scene represented and, in terms of viewpoint, a neutral vantage point is chosen. For example:

- (12) Egyszerű, fölfelé támasztani, szél ellen egy láncot is kell alkalmazni. Ha már az is elszakad, a ház teteje sincs már a helyén.<sup>28</sup>

‘It’s simple, one must buttress it upwards, also use a chain against the wind. If that breaks, too, the roof is not in place anymore, either.’

Total lack of subjectivisation, however, is very rare: the text producer or the addressee appears in most cases in construal, in some minimally explicit (or somewhat more explicit) manner. In the following two examples this is minimally so: only punctuation or a discourse marker is there to suggest subjectivisation:

- (13a) Miért kell egy kerti medencét, ha csak nyáron használják, vagyonokért befedni?????<sup>29</sup>

‘Why do you have to cover a garden pool, only used in the summer, for a fortune?’

<sup>27</sup> <http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?go=76887622&t=9134899>

<sup>28</sup> [http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na\\_start=150&na\\_step=30&t=9097176&na\\_order=](http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na_start=150&na_step=30&t=9097176&na_order=)

<sup>29</sup> [http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na\\_start=150&na\\_step=30&t=9097176&na\\_order=](http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na_start=150&na_step=30&t=9097176&na_order=)

- (13b) Meg ugye ez a mobil medence fórum. ;- )30  
 ‘And this is the mobile pool forum, isn’t it. J’

It is more often the case that the speaker or the addressee directly appears in the scene in the text, mainly as a grammatical subject. For instance:

- (14a) Szia,  
 én is tettem fel elég sok képet, leírást.  
 Nekem remekül működik, most lesz már a 3. szezon.<sup>31</sup>  
 ‘Hi, / I’ve also uploaded loads of pictures, descriptions. / It works fine with me, we’ll have the third season now.’
- (14b) Ha felállítod, nem süllyeszted, akkor annyiért már egy 4,6\*1,2 szépen belefér.  
 Minél vastagabb fóliával vedd, lehetőleg jó minőségű homokszűrővel. A felállítás videóit a honlapon megtalálod.<sup>32</sup>  
 ‘If you set it up, not countersink it, then a 4.6\*1.2 one fits in well for that much. Buy it with the thickest possible foil, possibly with a good quality sand filter. Videos of how to set it up can be found in the homepage.’

Another often employed device is the marking of the “subject of consciousness”, that is, the person responsible for the piece of information presented (cf. Tátrai 2005). For instance:

- (15) A napernyőtalp az jó ötlet, de nem kell venni szárítót. Egy lakatos fillérékért összeheszt olyan és AKKORA keretet, amilyen kell. Ami ráadásul tovább is tart.  
**Szerintem.**<sup>33</sup>  
 ‘The sunshade stand is a good idea, but don’t buy a drier. A locksmith will weld a frame for pennies, any type and any SIZE you want. And it will even hold longer.  
 / **I think.**’

In examples (14a,b) and (15) and in similar cases, the style is **neutral** in the domain of personalization: although subjectivisation does take place, that is, the person of the participant(s) does appear in some manner in the scenes construed, it remains in the background, and does not emerge into the foreground of attention.

With respect to personalisation, style really starts working where the degree of subjectivization is markedly low (e.g. *kéretik betartani a többi adószabályt*<sup>34</sup> ‘all other tax regulations are to be observed’), or where it is increased, that is, the person of the language user or the addressee, their emotions or opinions, or their interpersonal relationship, is foregrounded and more forcefully elaborated in some manner (e.g. by the use of speech acts like salutation, leave-taking, apologising, etc.) either thematically or in the form of metalinguistic reflections.

<sup>30</sup> [http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na\\_start=90&na\\_step=30&t=9097176&na\\_order=](http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na_start=90&na_step=30&t=9097176&na_order=)

<sup>31</sup> [http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na\\_start=60&na\\_step=30&t=9097176&na\\_order=](http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na_start=60&na_step=30&t=9097176&na_order=)

<sup>32</sup> <http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?t=9097176&go=109966900>

<sup>33</sup> [http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na\\_start=120&na\\_step=30&t=9097176&na\\_order=](http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na_start=120&na_step=30&t=9097176&na_order=)

<sup>34</sup> <http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?t=9018306&go=91383317>



The role of personalisation in style is also shown by the fact that a number of metastylistic reflections refer to it in forum contributions. In most cases, participants evaluate the increase of personalisation or subjectivisation **negatively** and reject it. This mainly happens when personalisation increases with respect to the addressee and typically occurs in metapragmatic reflections in cases of verbal conflict (primarily as instances of “getting personal”). The contributor complains that the discourse topic and thus the focus of attention has been shifted from an external subject-matter to the interlocutor (that is, him/herself), usually in association with some negative social content. For instance:

(16) Sandhurst: Te szőke vagy?

‘Are you a blonde?’

Doblasz: Légy szíves **ne személyeskedj**. Inkább ne is írv semmit, kösz.<sup>35</sup>

‘Please **don’t be personal**. Better not write anything, thanks.’

The shift of discourse attention to the interlocutor, often linked with a face threatening act, often occurs in debates in place of arguments. In a number of metalinguistic reflections the participants thematise just this. For instance:

(17) Megjegyzem **érved nincs, csak személyeskedsz**.<sup>36</sup>

‘Incidentally, **you have no argument, you are just being personal**.’

Or:

(18a) Fehér Mamba: Pontosan olyanok, amiket te leírtál, meg szoktak történni fordítva. De olyanra tőled sem emlékszem, aminek te lettél volna a főszereplője ‘Just the kinds of things you write about do happen the other way round. But I don’t recall any from you which you would have been the hero of.’

Mostlemegyanapésújra...: **Ne személyeskedj**. Én hoztam rengeteg olyan példát amit személyesen láttam. Te egyet sem tudsz hozni hanem a férfiak erőszakát akarod a nőkre fogni.<sup>37</sup>

‘**Don’t get personal**. I brought up loads of examples I had seen myself. You cannot bring any but want to impute violence committed by men to women.’

On the other hand, as part of his/her active style-determining behaviour, the addressee can refute such an interpretation. For instance, the conversation in (18a) went on as follows:

(18b) Fehér Mamba: Én nem akarom a férfiak erőszakát a nőkre fogni.

Azt állítom, hogy férfiak is bántanak nőket, meg nők is férfiakat. Ezt állítom, és nem más.<sup>38</sup>

‘I don’t want to impute violence committed by men to women. I claim that men often hurt women and women also hurt men. This is what I claim, nothing else.’

<sup>35</sup> [http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na\\_start=9834&na\\_step=30&t=9063241&na\\_order=](http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na_start=9834&na_step=30&t=9063241&na_order=)

<sup>36</sup> [http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na\\_start=61571&na\\_step=200&t=9063241&na\\_order=](http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na_start=61571&na_step=200&t=9063241&na_order=)

<sup>37</sup> [http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na\\_start=5740&na\\_step=30&t=9165170&na\\_order=](http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na_start=5740&na_step=30&t=9165170&na_order=)

<sup>38</sup> [http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na\\_start=5740&na\\_step=30&t=9165170&na\\_order=](http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na_start=5740&na_step=30&t=9165170&na_order=)

Here, the participants carried on a metalinguistic negotiation concerning the symbolic social meaning of their own language use. In metalinguistic negotiations of this kind, cases can also be found where one of the participants accepts the notion of getting personal and hence the act of personalisation but rejects its interpretation in a negative function:

- (19) Wizard: Mivel homlokpuszi, és vállveregetés nem várható tőlem, és én sem igénylem, ezt a részét itt tényleg lezárom, mert hátha van valakinek életszerűbb, **kevésbé személyes** mondandója.

‘Since you can’t expect a kiss on the forehead and slaps on the shoulder from me, and I don’t expect anything like that from you, I close this part down as somebody may have more realistic and **less personal** things to say.’

namiez: Sajnos le kell lohasszam nagyravágyó terveid, hogy itt befejezhető lenne a vita. Ugyanis **amíg Zuglóról beszélünk igenis személyeskedően beszélünk róla!** Nem mindig a te személyedről persze, hanem apolgármester, a vagyonkezelő és eszközkezelő személyeiről, a képviselőtestület személyeiről, stb... A politika általában személyekről szól, ha nem vetted volna eddig észre! És a nem politika is! Beszélhetünk régi zuglói épületekről(én pl. nagyon szívesen) de azonnal szóba kerülnek tervezőik, építetőik, lakóik, stb... azaz megint csak személyek, akik vagy jót vagy rosszat tettek, **Így ha dicsérjük, szídjuk őket, vagy tevékenységüket, azonnal személyeskedünk.**

Na kellemes vasárnap délutáni elmélkedést ezeken!<sup>39</sup>

‘Unfortunately, I have to throw cold water on your high hopes that the debate can be put an end to here. **As long as we talk about Zugló we will talk about it in a personal tone.** Not always concerning your own person, of course, but the person of the major, the persons of the property holding office and of the management corporation, the persons of the municipal corporation, etc. Politics is in general about persons, if you haven’t noticed so far.

And non-politics, too. We can talk about old buildings in Zugló (I’d be glad to for one), but very soon we would be mentioning their designers, builders, inhabitants, etc. so, again, persons who did something right or wrong. Whether we praise them or scold them, or what they did, we will immediately get personal. Well, have a nice Sunday afternoon pondering on these things.’

Finally, it may happen that in the course of metastylistic negotiations, concerning the notion of getting personal in the present case, the participants succeed in arriving at a shared view and thereby resolve their interactional conflict:

- (20) Piros Góz: Nem válaszoltál semmire, amiről én írtam.

Érvek híján továbbra is csak **durván személyeskedni** tudsz. Én pedig általában közszereplőkről mondom véleményyt.

‘You did not reply to anything I had written. / In lack of arguments, all you

<sup>39</sup> [http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na\\_start=310&na\\_step=30&t=9046017&na\\_order=](http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na_start=310&na_step=30&t=9046017&na_order=)

can do is carry on being **rudely personal**. But I tell my opinion about public figures in general.'

namiez: Azt írod nem válaszoltam semmire és érvek híján csak durván személyeskedek! Na akkor idemásolom leveled, nehogy elfelejtsd mit is írtál! 'You write I did not reply to anything and that I am rudely personal in lack of arguments. Now I copy your letter here so that you don't forget what you have written.'

*"Jaj, de sokan, és milyen jól megélnék ebből a rettenetesen túllihegett akadálymentesítés-bizniszből is...Tudod, mi hiányzik bántóan ennek a mada-gitt-egyletnek a honlapjáról is? Ami a zuglo.hu-ról is: az üvegseb menüpont. Meg hát a „főcivil” itt is kicsoda? Egy szánalomraméltó baloldali feminista. Van az ilyen nőcikre egy szép magyar szó is, csak nem akarom ide beírni."*

'Many people make a living, and a good one, on this terribly overstated business of accessibility, too... Do you know what is sadly missing from the homepage of this putty club of antidiscrimination? The same thing that is missing from zuglo.hu: the menu item Transparency. And again: who is the "top civil" here? A pathetic left-wing feminist. There's a good Hungarian word for such dames but I don't want to write it down here.'

**Mire is kellett volna válaszolnom?** Egyetlen kérdést sem tettél fel! Te nem szoktál kérdéseket feltenni! Te magabiztosan, meggyőződve arról hogy te, csakis te mindent mindenkinél jobban tudsz,általában határozottan „**kijelentesz**”, **időnként utasítasz!**

'**What should I have answered here?** You didn't ask a single question! You don't usually ask questions at all. You are confident that you and only you are the one who knows everything best, and in general you definitely "**state**" something, sometimes you **give orders!**'

[...] Azt írod érvek híján...

Milyen érveket is keresel tehát egy olyan párbeszédben, ahol nem igazi vita folyik, hanem az **egyik fél pocskondiázik**, a másik meg ezt sérelmezi? [...]

'You write in lack of arguments... / What arguments are you looking for in a dialogue where there is no actual debate but one party abuses the other, and the other resents this?'

**Azt javaslom fogd vissza magadat kicsit!** Gondold át szavaidat, mielőtt olyan nagy mellénnyel te akarnád meghatározni a világot! [...]

Én mindenesetre **több tiszteletet** követelek tőled mások iránt!

'**I suggest you should keep yourself back a little.** Think over your words before you want to direct the world smugly. I, for one, demand that you show **more respect** for other people.'

Piros Góz: **Átgondoltam, amiket írtál, és belátom, valóban elvettem a sulykot.** [...] Mea culpa.

**'I thought about what you wrote and I concede I had indeed gone too far. Mea culpa.'**

namiez: Szia Piros Góz!

**Örülök, hogy így alakult.** Én is írtam még egy - nem feltétlenül szerelmes szavakkal tűzdelt - hozzászólást, szintén ez ügyben.

A sors valamit tudhatott, mert mikor el akartam küldeni, „időtúllépés miatt” (?) lenyomott a böngészőm! **Így most mindketten további indulatok nélkül írhatunk!** [...] <sup>40</sup>

'Hi, Piros Góz, / **I'm glad this happened.** I wrote another comment, not necessarily full of words of love, in this matter. Fate must have been well-informed: when I wanted to send it, my browser said "timeout" and let me down. **So we can both carry on writing without working ourselves up again.'**

This sample discourse also shows that, in general, it is not increased personalisation that is the problem but instances when it is coupled with some negative social meaning or act: in the contribution that closed this negotiation, we can also observe increased personalisation, but this time coupled with positive social meaning.

### 3. The returns of metastylistic reflections

In the foregoing, we have mentioned metastylistic reflections several times; now we discuss these briefly. As was stated in the introduction, discourse style is shaped by the participants actively and via negotiations, in which process a dominant role is played by their reflections, references, or instructions concerning style. These metastylistic reflections are useful for the analysis of the **stylistic operations and views of language users**, for the exploration of the process of their negotiations on style. On the other hand, they give us but limited insight into this process: given that most metastylistic reflections come about due to some communication disorder or conflict, they yield less information concerning "normal" cases.

The forum and comment texts under discussion here contain a high number of **metastylistic reflections**, i.e., signals or remarks primarily referring to text formulation (the manner of language use), that is, to style and its connection with meaning. They play an important role in the way style works in language use, just like metadiscursive reflections that are in general very important in the activity of mutual meaning construal (Verschuereen 1999: 187, Tátrai 2006).

The frequency of occurrence of metastylistic reflections shows that this aspect of language use, style, is an important thing for the participants, since they formulate explicit evaluations and make suggestions and give instructions to one another in this respect. In addition, the large number of metastylistic reflections in the forums explored here witnesses the importance of pragmatic-stylistic negotiations going on between participants.

Metapragmatic (including metastylistic) signals can be associated with diverse levels of metapragmatic awareness; accordingly, their degrees and forms of implementation also exhibit wide variety. Stylistic phenomena in language have a certain degree of reflexivity to begin with, given that style starts working where the linguistic form of an expression is fore-

<sup>40</sup> [http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na\\_start=0&na\\_step=30&t=9046017&na\\_order=](http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na_start=0&na_step=30&t=9046017&na_order=)

grounded (Tolcsvai Nagy 2005: 33), i.e., occupies the focus of attention; but there are more explicit reflections in this respect, too. In terms of the degree of their explicitness, style-related reflections can be arranged along a scale between implicit or minimally explicated and explicit or maximally explicated reference to a previous portion of text (Verschuere 1999: 187, 2004: 60, Tátrai 2006). Among less explicit tools of metastylistic reflection we can mention, for instance, punctuation (quotation marks, question marks, or typographic possibilities like capitalisation or the use of bold type, e.g. (21)); among more explicit ones, citing the partner's words, and among the most explicit ones, we find interpretations, instructions, and even lengthy explanations concerning style (tone, way of speaking), cf. (22).<sup>41</sup>

- (21) *namiez: Wizard „barátom”!*  
*Én vagyok beképzelt?*  
*Ugyan már! Az én, te általad állított beképzeltségem „megyei bajnokság” a te BL-es nagyképűségedhez, és arroganciádhoz!*<sup>42</sup>

‘My “friend” Wizard, / Me, conceited? / Come on! The conceit you attribute to me is “county league” as compared to your Champions’ League bumptiousness and arrogance.’

- (22) *Acura: a **fölnyeneskedő, nagyképű stílust** meg le kéne vetkôzni*<sup>43</sup>  
 ‘and this **supercilious, bumptious style** should be given up’

Metastylistic reflections are not only crucial for the operation of style; they may also yield an important clue to the process and aspects of style formulation and perception for its scholarly description. On the other hand, they have limitations, too, with respect to linguistic analysis: they are mostly associated with the occurrence of some problem, hence they hardly reflect cases in which style is likewise an important factor but its use or perception is unproblematic. Stylistic reflections primarily become explicit if and when there is some difficulty in the process of mutual meaning construal and discourse participants wish to make a stylistic interpretation more accurate or correct; or in cases where the addressee rejects the style and the meaning it carries or the context offered by the interlocutor by using that style. In such cases, not only style and the activity of style formation but also its metalinguistic elaboration becomes part of the social-interpersonal activity of the participants.

Consider a few more examples of metastylistic references and negotiations associated with the various domains of style. Some of these refer to “tone” in general (e.g. *Ovis a stílusod*<sup>44</sup> ‘Your style is nursery level’), others concern more specific stylistic features.

Due to their frequency of occurrence, remarks concerning **familiar/formal 2sg forms** are the most conspicuous: they usually explicate informality expectations already mentioned and implement an important step of negotiating the **degree of formality**. For instance:

<sup>41</sup> In the examples to follow, bold type indicates illustrations of the phenomenon under discussion. The quotations are literal and spelling is not corrected in them.

<sup>42</sup> [http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na\\_start=60&na\\_step=30&t=9046017&na\\_order=](http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na_start=60&na_step=30&t=9046017&na_order=)

<sup>43</sup> <http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?go=25833878&t=9012411>

<sup>44</sup> <http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?t=9003631&go=107887031>

- (23) torpi: Mit tanacsol? Ha lement az e havi adag hagyjam abba? Torpi.  
 ‘What do you advise me to do? With this month’s portion finished, shall I stop? Torpi.’

Mr Spock: Nem. Semmikeppen sem, amig nincs terhességi teszt es nincs diagnosztizálva a problema. [...] **Ja igen, es legyszives tegezz, itt az a „szabaly”**. Gabor<sup>45</sup>

‘No. By no means, no, until there is a pregnancy test and the problem is diagnosed. **Oh yes, please address me in the familiar way, this is the “rule” here.** Gábor’

Reflections concerning the domain of **value** are also frequent: they occur especially with respect to value-deprivation (e.g. mockery):

- (24) **Gúnyolódj** csak nyugodtan, de a **hangnem** sokat számít. Sztem és nekem. Én már csak ilyen elfuserált vagyok...<sup>46</sup>  
 ‘**Carry on mocking** at your will, but the **tone** is important. In my view and to my mind. I’m that messed-up, you see...’

Style-related rebuke primarily implements redefinition of the social relationship in such cases.

With respect to reflections and negotiation, we should mention cases in which participants negotiate style with the moderators themselves: for instance, (25) explains the function of vulgarity:

- (25) OGGI: Kedves Wágner Úr!  
 Tisztelettel kérdezném, miért nem lép a moderátorai tökére? Sokadszor irtják ki a Nagyon vigyázzál köcsög! című topikot ill. annak klónjait. Kérjük a topik visszaállítását. **Nyelvezete és gondolatvilága talán kissé gyalulatlan**, de nekünk nagy **örömet szerez, mást meg nem bántunk** vele.<sup>47</sup>  
 ‘Dear Mr Wagner, / I would ask you with due respect, why don’t you step on your moderators’ balls? They’ve destroyed the topic “Careful, bugger” and its clones for the umpteenth time. Please restore the topic. **Its language and range of thought may be somewhat rough-hewn**, but it **gives us great pleasure and does not hurt** anybody else.’

In (26), a user complains about another user’s rude style to the moderator:

- (26) Pistike: Ez a wizes nevű egyénnel nem lehetne valamit kezdeni?  
 Nem nagyon vagyok hozzászokva, hogy **így beszéljenek velem**.  
 Többek között ezért nem járok a polidilibe.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> <http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?go=23124283&t=9041994>

<sup>46</sup> [http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na\\_start=61171&na\\_step=200&t=9063241&na\\_order=](http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na_start=61171&na_step=200&t=9063241&na_order=)

<sup>47</sup> [http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na\\_start=50007&na\\_step=30&t=9111540&na\\_order=](http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na_start=50007&na_step=30&t=9111540&na_order=)

<sup>48</sup> [http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na\\_start=50007&na\\_step=30&t=9111540&na\\_order=](http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?na_start=50007&na_step=30&t=9111540&na_order=)

‘Couldn’t we do something about this guy wizes? / I’m not accustomed to **being talked to like this**. / Among other things, this is why I don’t frequent the polibedlam.’

Metastylistic reflections are a good indication of the fact that language users pay special attention to stylistic phenomena and that their negotiation efforts with respect to style have a very important role in their social activity carried on in the discourse.

These examples also show how forum participants perceive and elaborate on their own style (or that of their partners). Several of the above metastylistic reflections referred to the fact that certain styles or stylistic features (like vulgar speech or formal address) did not fit the norms of the given topic or forum community: language users thus point out the distribution of style types of the individual forums. Within internet communication and specifically within the text type of forum contributions there are several characteristic style types or **protostyles** (Tolcsvai Nagy 2005: 91); as they are analysed, their co-occurrence with certain textual features becomes apparent, and together they are linked with characteristic topic types (text subtypes). Three of these are specifically worth mentioning here.

Topics fundamentally differ in whether they are organised for accessing or sharing a concrete piece of **information** or whether their aim is the **verbal company-keeping** (with a **display of subjective** messages) of participants who are interested in similar themes or simply in one another, in a thematically loosely oriented or quite unconstrained, contact-centred conversation (on linguistic functions see Habermas 1979: 248, Brown—Yule 1983: 3). The two major functions are of course not completely distinct and a number of intermediate variants can be observed (e.g. thematic communities of conversations on some circumscribed subject-matter) but one of the two functions is normally dominant, resulting in text typological and stylistic peculiarities:

Among **text typological differences** between primarily information-oriented and primarily interpersonal/contact-oriented topics, the most important one is the degree of their thematic restrictedness: the thematic boundaries of topics primarily organised for sharing concrete information are narrow, while contact-centred conversations are not (or only loosely) linked to a given theme. Another important difference is observable in length and interaction structure: in information-oriented topics, contributions are usually brief and loaded with information, and participants swap places more often, while in interaction-oriented topics lengthier contributions may be accompanied by extremely short ones (background channel signals or minimal replies) and most of the range of participants is permanent.

Contact-oriented conversations are mainly characterised by a protostyle in which the degree of **informality** is high and is often linked with phenomena of **familiarity**. Strong intimacy and the use of abbreviations and emoticons are often observable; **value-deprivation** (primarily as a sign of a relaxed atmosphere or humour) and **vulgarity**, as well as certain group-identity characteristics (slang, college talk) are not infrequent, either.

In information-centred topics, **informal style** is also typical, but the role of **politeness** between partners is significantly more pronounced here. Vulgarity is rare, but the use of various occupational registers is significant.

There are even larger differences in terms of **personalisation**: the level of subjectivity is much higher in contact-oriented topics than in information-oriented ones. Participants disclose

numerous pieces of information about themselves, including their mental or emotional states, and show interest in their discourse partners in the same respect, ask questions, and refer back to the partner's contributions. This supports the closeness of the interaction between subjectivity and the interpersonal aspect of language (cf. Vis, Sanders—Spooren 2010). In information-centred texts, propositional content and (mainly) the outside world are in the focus of attention. A certain degree of personalisation is observable here, too, but mainly as part of shaping inter-participant relationships (politeness, friendliness), and participants' persons are only elaborated on to a neutral degree: they appear as grammatical subjects or, if the contributor wishes to tell about his/her opinion or feelings, this is done with respect to information to be shared. In that function, that is, linked to the piece of information communicated, presentation of the subject of consciousness is also frequent (*szerintem* 'in my view', *állítólag* 'allegedly').

A third type of texts is also typical in forums and comments: these could be called **opinion-sharing or debate topics**. While thematically they are also associated with a circumscribed subject-matter, their aim is not the exchange of concrete pieces of information but sharing and learning about individual opinions. Typical examples are political or ideological topics (e.g. *A római katolikus egyház tévtanításai* 'False dogmas of the Roman Catholic church'). Contributors are usually unknown to one another and the discourse centres on a given external subject-matter (independent of the participants); yet along with an objectivising style, these texts often carry a high degree of personalisation and emotionality. Participants not only express their agreement/disagreement and present arguments concerning each other's opinions, but they often express their feelings, too, and often comment on the partner's personality, thus, along with the subject-matter being discussed, social aspects of the interaction are also often foregrounded and interpersonal games are developed. Style often becomes part of those games, as does metalinguistic reference to it (e.g. rebuke):

- (27) Kérj elnézést azért a sok **ocsmányságért**, amit csak ide beírtál (idézeteket lásd lejjebb!), aztán akkor **jogosan** várhatod el, hogy amíg **te tisztességesen beszélsz**, addig a neked válaszoló is **ilyen hangnemben** szóljon hozzád! Addig viszont nem!<sup>49</sup>

'Apologise for the lots of **smut** that you wrote in here (see below for specimens), and then you can **legitimately** expect, as long as **you talk straight**, the one who answers you to talk to you **in a similar vein**. But not until then.'

The existence of protostyles belonging to these forum subtypes and the related categorisation are also shown by speakers' metastylistic remarks in which a contributor is sent over to a different topic because of the style of his/her contribution, for instance:

- (28a) Sánta Kutya (SK): Ezt viszont nem kellene. Menj a **Polidilibe** vagy a **kocsmába, itt nem szokás** [ti. így beszélni]<sup>50</sup>  
'Now you should not do that. Go **to Polibedlum or to a pub, it is not done here** [i.e., we do not talk like this here].'

<sup>49</sup> <http://forum.index.hu/Article/viewArticle?a=96474895&t=9067148>

<sup>50</sup> <http://torzaszta.hu/Article/showArticle?go=91485001&t=9006401>



- (28b) Murder Incorporated: Hazugozhatod, sikkasztózhatsz, de **alpári kifejezéseket nem használhatsz**. Ha ennek megértése nem megy, akkor **menj át a polidilire vagy a HUSZba, ott seggezhetsz** kedvedre. Most arról nem beszélve, hogy a nevek kifacsarása is jellemzően polidilis műfaj.<sup>51</sup>

‘You can call him a liar and an embezzler, but you **cannot use bad language**. If you can’t cope with that, **go over to polibedlum or HUSZ, there you can say shithead** at your will. Not to mention that squeezing names is again a typical polibedlum genre.’

- (28c) Seraph: alfreedoo

Megpróbálom tagoltan, lassan érthetően, és utoljára:

Az egy dolog, hogy Te vitatkozni akarsz az IKE topikban. Az a topik azonban **nem arra lett kitalálva**. Ha zavar, ami benne van ne olvasd. (...) Van egy topik az IKE offolónak, **menj abba, ha vitázni óhajtasz**. Vagy bármely más topikba, amelyik a témába vág.<sup>52</sup>

‘alfreedoo, / I try once more, well-articulated, slowly, clearly, and for the last time: / You may well wish to argue in the IKE topic. But that topic is **simply not for that**. If you are troubled by what there is there, don’t read it. (...) There’s a topic for IKE offers, **go there if you want to argue**. Or to any other topic with the same range of subjects.’

All these observations support the claim that co-occurrences of values realised in the various stylistic domains do indeed create certain protostyle categories associated with certain forum subtypes that are also recognised by language users and this has a significant role in the organisation of communication and style of the forums. They also suggest that categories, i.e., protostyles, are shaped by language users themselves during their negotiations.

#### 4. Summary

Despite the similar communicative situations characterising internet forum texts, significant stylistic variability is observable there. That variability turned out to be analysable in the functional cognitive framework that we have adopted but it required the use of text typological and sociolinguistic considerations, too. The analyses have shown that (of the socio-cultural dimensions of style) it was primarily the dimensions of attitude, situation, and value that had an important share in the characterisation of forum texts but the dimensions of time and language varieties were also important. In addition, the dimension of personalisation also had a prominent role: forum texts exhibit extensive variability in terms of personalization and such varieties often function as stylistic alternatives. We saw that both the degree of personalisation and other stylistic variables were influenced by the text typological character of the individual topics and that all those factors led to the emergence of certain protostyles.

<sup>51</sup> <http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?t=9111596&go=106798391&p=1>

<sup>52</sup> <http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?t=9032338&go=34142912>

Finally, both in the domains of attitude, situation, and value and in that of personalisation, the phenomenon of discourse-internal negotiation was observed and illustrated by numerous examples of the significance of metastylistic reflections. Several phenomena were only touched upon in passim, and lead over to areas such as the stylistic role of personalisation, the relationship between subjectivity, informality, and emotionality, a detailed study of prostyles and of the stylistic norms of internet language. These areas were not discussed in detail here but they would deserve a more thorough elaboration.

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