


## The Greek Referendum Vote of 2015 as a Paradoxical Communicative Practice: A Narrative, Future-Making Approach

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*This article adopts a pragmatic-communicative approach, derived from Gregory Bateson's cybernetic theory, to the Greek Referendum Vote of 2015. Applying this approach, we interpret the Referendum as a double-bind situation. Our research question is twofold: (1) How do potential Greek voters discursively construct the Referendum? (2) How do they respond to the communicative situation posed? A total of 124 written narratives, "Letters from the Future," written by 99 participants, were collected during the days prior to the vote. Their letters focused on a desired future situation after a YES or a NO vote outcome. Qualitative analysis showed how the letters were used to appropriate the Referendum query in a unique and deeply personalized manner. Moreover, we identified four types of responses to the ambivalent query: confirmation, rejection, disconfirmation, and meta-communication. These responses are indicative of the psychological and emotional burden posed by the query and of ways people responded to the query. In conclusion, we reflect on the importance of recognizing the psychological dimension of the vote, the role of narratives from the future for personal and social transformation, and the wider relevance of the proposed future-making, pragmatic approach to other Referendum situations.*

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**KEY WORDS:** pragmatics, double bind, voting, Greece, future narrative, discursive practice

In psychology, there is renewed interest in the constructive role of the future as guide for current thought and action (Seligman, Railton, & Baumeister, 2013; Sools & Mooren, 2012; Sools, Triliva, & Filippas, 2017; Sools, Tromp, & Mooren, 2015). Although future imagination has been central to earlier research on possible selves, for example (Cinnirella, 1998; Markus & Nurius, 1986), the

importance of a more radical and wide-ranging shift to a future-making science to address key challenges of our time has been proposed in disciplines ranging from psychology (Gergen, 2015), anthropology (Appadurai, 2013), sociology (Levitas, 2013), and philosophy (Unger, 2015). In political psychology, the importance of the future is implicit in central concepts such as ideology (Ho, Chau, Chiu, & Peng, 2003), expectation (Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman, 2013), motivation (van Zomeren, 2016), anxiety when anticipating future threats (Wohl & Branscombe, 2009), and ingroup projection processes (Sacchi, Carnaghi, Castellini, & Colombo, 2013). More explicit recognition of the constructive role of the future in political psychology can be found in research on political horizons (Dunmire, 2005), restorative justice (Greenwood, 2015), and the role of confidence in risk attitude (Kanner, 2004).

In research on voting and political choice, which is par excellence an area where anticipation of future developments plays an important role, the impact of voting intention on voting behavior is an example of prediction-oriented research (Roccatò & Zogmaister, 2010). While prediction is about reliable and accurate modeling of the future based on past and present attitudes and values, future-making research shifts attention to the future as constructive for the present. This shift entails a focus on possibilities rather than probabilities. While probability thinking typically is about reducing risks, possibility thinking is about opening up to desired alternatives. Moreover, probability thinking is based on statistical modeling aimed at accurate predictions, while possibility thinking assumes that the future is a cultural fact, hence a construction open to negotiation and change (Appadurai, 2013). Out of many factors influencing possibility thinking, a particularly robust finding is that anxiety seriously reduces possibility thinking, while positive emotions like happiness increase creativity and the perception of possibilities (Fredrickson, 2013). Therefore, we would argue that in a socioeconomic and political context replete with turmoil, such as the Greek Referendum in 2015 where the stakes are high and the present is fraught with anxiety and uncertainty about the future, a possibility-oriented, future-making approach is particularly relevant.

The way politicians discursively construct (and restrict) a particular vision of future reality as the privileged one at the expense of alternative visions has been nicely illustrated by Dunmire's (2005) analysis of President Bush's speech outlining the rationale for war against Iraq. She shows how his discursive strategy is strategically aimed at setting up contrasts between the privileged and alternative visions and implicates the public in taking position ("for or against us"). The construction of polarities in this example may have been particularly harsh but is in itself not unique to the Bush administration. Political parties and governments often rely on antagonistic discourse in positioning themselves as different from opposing parties or countries (Armbrust, 2013; Thomassen, 2012). While discursive and rhetorical approaches have revealed power differences and structural features of political discourse, the psychological consequences of binary political discourse, inherent in the structure of many referenda in the proposition of a binary Yes or No choice, at the level of individual voters remains neglected.

In this article, we take the Greek Referendum vote of 2015 as point of departure. In this situation, fraught with perceived ambiguity, anxiety, and precarity, we propose a future-making approach focused on possibilities to create a space for prospective reflection. We investigate how from within this situation hope and possibility can (or cannot) be constructed by asking the twofold question: First, how do Greek potential voters *construct* the Referendum query when presented with the task of imagining a desired future? and second, while looking back from the perspective of this desired future, how do voters *respond* to the Referendum?

To understand what is psychologically involved in these tasks of constructing and responding to the Referendum, and why a reflection from the point of a desired future can assist in developing possibility-increasing thought and action, we shall first frame the Referendum as potentially paradoxical communicative practice. The relevance of combining the proposed future-making approach with the pragmatic approach to human communication outlined below is that the pragmatic approach

**REFERENDUM of the 5<sup>th</sup> of July 2015**

Should the plan of agreement be accepted, which was submitted by the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund in the Eurogroup of 25.06.2015 and comprises of two parts, which constitute their unified proposal?

The first document is entitled "Reforms For The Completion Of The Current Program And Beyond" and the second "Preliminary Debt Sustainability Analysis."

NOT ACCEPTED / NO

ACCEPTED / YES

**Figure 1.** Referendum query Greece.

balances and nuances the search for possibilities by contextualizing this search as departing from a dilemmatic situation.

### **The Greek Referendum as Paradoxical Communicative Practice**

Starting with how the Referendum query was formulated (see Figure 1), the ambiguity and incomprehensibility of the language may in itself have contributed to setting up an uncertain situation. Moreover, the dilemmas it raised were by no means unambiguous and clear for the voters. The Referendum question did not seem to be limited to a particular issue, referring to the direction of the reform requests, the national strategy, and relations with the European Union (EU; Katsanidou & Otjes, 2015). Additionally, the clarity of the process was not aided by people's historical memory and the symbolic weight that referendums had carried in the past (seven votes all dealing with constitutional and not policy issues).<sup>1</sup> Finally, the political controversy inherent within the referendum vote was (and still is) unresolved. The main actors—the government, European institutions, opposition parties, and organizations and collectives—construed it differently and associated it with different stakes (e.g., loan agreement, choice regarding currency, economic policy, or even Greece's membership status with the EU).

So, the meaning of the query was the subject of considerable debate, but ambiguity is in itself insufficient to speak of a paradoxical communicative practice proper. To understand how the Greek Referendum vote of 2015 may have operated as a paradoxical communicative practice and a double-bind situation in particular, we now take a closer look at the pragmatic approach to human communication (Bateson, 1960, 1972). This approach is pragmatic in its focus on "what communication does" (its pragmatic properties), rather than on the meaning of communication (semantic relations) or on how communication is structured (syntactic and grammatical relations). This approach foreshadows the later discursive turn in the social sciences. Yet it is distinct in that it offers means for understanding the psychological consequences of paradoxical communicative practices in which individual actors are embedded, particularly through the notion of the double bind. Although the relevance of a pragmatic-communicative approach to political science has been noted from the outset (Bateson, 1935, 1942), and the double-bind concept has found its way into other fields (O'Neill & O'Reilly, 2010; Sools, Engen, & van Baerveldt, 2007; Trovão, 2016), the concept has not been used in political science yet.

<sup>1</sup> Historically, the last referendum vote was carried out during dictatorship rule in Greece. Moreover, at the beginning of the socioeconomic crisis, Prime Minister Papandreou called for a Referendum vote regarding initiating measures and monitoring by the European authorities and the International Monetary Fund that was swiftly and vociferously discouraged by his European counterparts.

Technically, a double bind consists of the following three components (Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967, pp. 171–172):

- 1) A high-stake situation exists which is, materially and/or psychologically, vital for one or more of those involved;
- 2) A pragmatic paradox emerges—that is, a paradoxical situation that cannot be solved logically but has practical consequences for those involved (as is the case in the context of this situation); and
- 3) The receiver of the message finds it impossible to step outside the frame set by the message.

In the following, we will discuss if and how these three conditions of a double-bind situation apply to the Greek Referendum vote. First, we zoom out to the first component of the double bind by taking into account the sociopolitical and communicative context of the Referendum. The socioeconomic and political circumstances in Greece leading up to the July 2015 Referendum Vote can be described as conflictual. The referendum was announced by a newly formed “leftist” and “far-right” coalition government that had gained ascendancy to power adhering to an antiausterity agenda. Having come to an impasse in the negotiations, Prime Minister Tsipras organized polls within a 10-day period. The defunct negotiations brought the country to the brink of a disorderly bankruptcy, led to capital controls, and accentuated narratives of “Grexit” and “a return to the Drachma.” Taking these political circumstances into consideration along with the complexity of citizen-process preferences, the vote was a climactic moment in a thick, complex, and strife-ridden time. Moreover, the imminent threat of Greece leaving the EU raised the stakes. Taken together, this provided a fruitful ground for the first condition necessary for a double bind.

Within this context of what has been dubbed a perceived “colonization of the country” in the imaginary of the populace (Theodosopoulos, 2014), the endless negotiations and imposed austerity regimes, national pride, and imminent economic disaster, we can now see how the Referendum posed a paradoxical message (the second part of the double-bind structure). Tentatively, this message could be formulated as the command to uphold democracy (“vote freely”) in the contradictory way similar to the command to “be spontaneous” used as canonical example of a pragmatic paradox (Watzlawick et al., 1967). The impossibility of the command to “vote freely” can be seen in Prime Minister Tsipras asking the voters to deliver a “No” response and qualifying this by adding that such an outcome would allow him to resolve the impasse in the negotiations (Katsanidou & Otjes, 2015). Moreover, within the confines of the Referendum query (dichotomous yes/no), there was no space to communicate what a yes or no vote meant to the voter, thus further tightening the bind by fulfilling its second condition (setting up a pragmatic paradox). This is not to say that all voters equally experienced the query as a paradox, as they may, for example, have tried to avoid the paradox by ignoring the vote. However, in a situation where everyday life, daily conversations, and media coverage were dominated by the Referendum vote, this might not have been an easy task.

This leads us to the third and final condition, concerning the impossibility of escaping the paradox. To fully understand the difficulty of achieving this task psychologically and communicatively, it is important to take into account the possible responses to a pragmatic paradox as outlined by Watzlawick et al., for example, *confirmation*, *rejection*, *disconfirmation*, and *meta-communication* (1967, pp. 68–70).

Confirmation involves acceptance and validation of the proposed paradox. This possible response to the Referendum acknowledges the paradoxical nature of the communicative situation without having a way out, hence requiring the ability to endure the paradox. The difference between rejection and disconfirmation is that rejection validates the paradox by at least recognizing its existence.

Disconfirmation, on the other hand (often in the form of ignoring the paradox), invalidates its very existence and legitimacy. Put differently, while rejection essentially gives the message “the Referendum query is wrong” or “I disagree with the Referendum query,” disconfirmation is equated with the denial of the existence of a problematic Referendum query. Rejection can be an empowering response of saying “no” to an undesired situation, which requires at least awareness of the problem. Disconfirmation (implicit denial) can sometimes be the only viable option in situations of great distress. However, as Watzlawick and colleagues (1967) argue, it is by far the most important response in terms of its pragmatic consequences, which include the loss of self or alienation.

Meta-communication, finally, concerns explicit communication about the paradox and its implications. Because of power differences between conversation partners, this is usually difficult to achieve. Translated to the Referendum situation, the power asymmetry between the state who posed the Referendum query on the one hand and the voters on the other hand can be perceived as a contributing factor that hinders meta-communication. Only meta-communication provides a true “escape” in the sense of a way to transcend the pragmatic paradox, while the other three bind a person to the situation by becoming complicit in its rules. This is where the pragmatic paradox becomes a double bind.

Returning to the third condition then, this is about the difficulty of averting a double-bind situation by using meta-communication because of its structural properties which prevent escape. Being presented with the strong ethical directive urging heroic citizens to overcome trepidation by upholding humanitarian values and by appealing to their crucial role in changing the course of the nation’s socioeconomic-political positioning, Greek citizens struggled to engage in the task. Watzlawick et al. (1967) offer two directions to a way out of a double bind, which both function to extend the frame of reference. The first, consulting an authoritative third party, seems difficult to envision as some transnational party would have to be perceived by voters as legitimate authority to intervene on their behalf. The second, the use of play, humor, and creativity may be represented by satirical commentaries about the Referendum vote, but in the voting system itself, with its binary yes-no choice, humor is not an option.

Altogether, our argument is that the Greek Referendum vote of 2015 qualifies as a potential double-bind situation, characterized by a high-stake situation where one is not able to make a metacommunication statement, alter the situation, or not respond (if even by ignoring). In the remainder of this article, we explore if and how potential voters themselves construct the Referendum as binding situation or otherwise, and what their responses to this situation are when presented with the opportunity to take a reflective distance from the future.

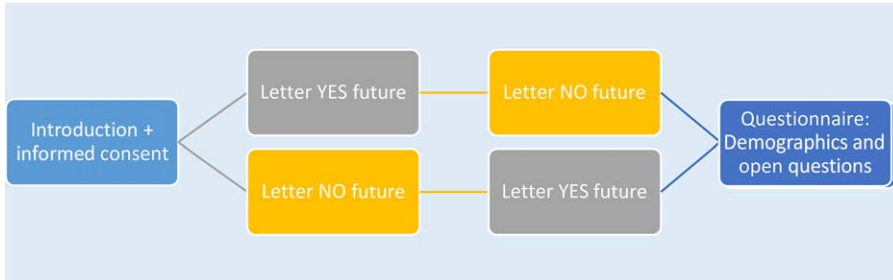
## Method

To explore how Greeks made sense of the Referendum situation, we asked potential voters in the five days prior to the vote to articulate a desired future after the Referendum. The prospective reflective instrument we employed, called *Letters from the Future* (e.g., written narratives), allows reflection on the present from the point of view of the future (Sools et al., 2015). The application of this tool in political psychology is new; yet it could provide a powerful means in constructing hopeful and meaningful responses to politically and psychologically pivotal moments.

### *Data Collection*

#### *Design*

The Qualtrics online survey we developed was first created in English and then translated to Greek by two team members who are bilingual. They also translated the collected letters. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the University of Twente. The online survey was launched five days prior to the Referendum and consisted of three parts visualized



**Figure 2.** Overview study design. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

in Figure 2: (1) introduction to the study and providing informed consent; (2) participants wrote one or two letters, depending on their choice to write only a Yes letter, only a No letter, or both a Yes and a No letter; (3) participants filled out a questionnaire consisting of demographic questions, their decision-making process, and views of the future. For the purpose of this article, we focus on qualitative analysis of the letters.

### *Instrument*

We adapted the instructions from the original *Letter from the Future* instrument (Sools & Mooren, 2012) to the Referendum context “Write a letter from a desired future” resulting from a “no” (respectively “yes”) to the referendum. The instructions included an explanation regarding the notion of a desired situation: “*Desired* because a wish came true, positive changes happened, a dream is realized, you managed to cope with a difficult situation, or anything else that seems desirable.” The instruction aimed for detail: “Try to imagine the situation in as much detail as possible (for example, what does the place look like, smell, and feel like? Who is there? What is happening? What are you doing? And anything else that comes to your mind). Tell your story from that specific future day, moment or event and describe whatever contributed to bringing it to fruition and how you look back as you approach the future.”

### *Sampling Strategy and Participants*

A combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling starting from the networks of the Greek research team members resulted in 124 letters from 99 participants. Letters ranged from 50 to 400 words, with the majority of the letters being over 300 words in length. A total of 18 letters from 11 participants was excluded, because of incomplete demographic data (15) or because they were written after the formal closing of the vote (3). The remaining 103 participants were 73 women and 30 men with an average age of 35 ( $SD = 25$ ). They chose to write 70 NO letters and 34 YES letters first. Although there was diversity in geographical location within Greece, insular Greece was dominant (47.3%). The majority of participants was single (56.4%). While 64.7% of the participants reported having completed higher education, the majority was without income or of the two lowest income categories (e.g., up to 10.000 and 15.000 Euros annually). Employment status varied from around 30% for full-time employment (31.5%) and unemployed (30.6%), to around 10% for part-time (9.1%) and self-employed (12.4%).

### *Data Analysis*

The qualitative analysis of the letters followed a cyclical-interactive process of going back and forth between data and theory (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). After reading and discussing of the letters, we observed the overall paradoxical nature of the data and noticed that the constructed paradoxes reflected present concerns of the writers. The analyses regarding the paradoxical nature of the data led to the adoption of the pragmatic approach to human communication outlined in the introduction.

After having been sensitized for the nature and various levels inherent in double-bind situation, we then applied double-bind theory more systematically to the data and formulated two sets of interpretive questions for our analysis. While the first set relates to research question 1 (construction of the Referendum), the second set relates to research question 2 (responses to the Referendum). The interpretive questions culminate in the identification of exemplary letters that depict how, from the position of being aware of and having temporal distance from the double-bind situation, an imaginative space is created leading to attempts to opt out:

- 1) *Construction of the Referendum.* How do participants appropriate the Referendum query in a way that reflects a present concern in their lives? To what extent does this appropriation set-up a double-bind situation? What kind of double bind(s) are constructed? To answer these questions, we looked both at the content and the form of the letters because major distinctions made in the double-bind theory (e.g., between contradiction and double bind, between rejection and confirmation) are often implicit and cannot be deduced from content alone. The argumentation of which words and wording corroborate our analysis is presented in more detail in the results section.
- 2) *Responses to the constructed Referendum situation.* How do participants construct their responses to the Referendum? What characterizes responses indicating a double-bind situation? To the extent that meta-communication is involved, does this communicative pattern succeed in escaping the double bind? Again, we looked at both content and form to identify meta-communicative language (e.g., “I wonder” or “I contemplate”).

In answer to both set of questions, we looked for maximum diversity in the data to ensure variation coverage rather than presenting the main type of response. In order to enhance the quality of our analysis, we searched for a spectrum of constructions including deviant cases (Polkinghorne, 2005), for example, “black swans” in which no double bind is constructed. Moreover, we read all letters to search for variety in responses (confirmatory, rejection, disconfirmatory, and meta-communication), including extreme cases (Ryan & Bernard, 2000), that is, instances of meta-communication which come close to avoiding the double bind. A final measure to increase the quality of analysis was to reach intersubjective agreement in an iterative process between the bilingual and English-speaking members of the research team. Two bilingual researchers (ST and EF) analyzed the whole dataset, looked for patterns and translated letters representing the required diversity to English. These were then concomitantly analyzed by three researchers (AS, ST, and EF) to discuss “personal lens” biases and to assure that saturation was reached (Nusch & Ness, 2015).

## Results

In this section, we first present our analysis of (1) how letter writers constructed the Referendum query and (2) how they responded to it. In Table 1, an overview is presented, showing on the left two opposing examples of Referendum constructions (where a double bind is and is not set-up) and on the right summarizing various ways in which the four possible responses to a pragmatic paradox take shape.

Overall, it should be noted that although there was a difference between YES and NO letters in terms of political orientation (e.g., predominantly conservative versus predominantly liberal oriented) and valence (YES letters were slightly more optimistic), they did not differ at the level of the pragmatic purposes they served. One category of letters ( $n = 32$ ), portraying internal migration (within Greece, mostly to one of the islands) or external migration (abroad, to another country in Europe or to other continents, see Letters 2, 4, and 5) is particularly useful to show how the apparent

**Table 1.** Summary of Constructions of and Responses to Referendum

Referendum Constructions	Responses to Referendum
<p><b>1. Setting-up the voting act as double-bind</b> Identity struggle in the voting booth (letter 1)</p> <p><b>2. Setting-up a contradiction between opposing life choices, not paradox</b> Torn between self-fulfilment and connection with others (letter 2)</p>	<p><b>1. Confirmation</b> – A clear-cut choice for either yes or no – Internal or external migration letters</p> <p><b>2. Rejection</b> – Refusal of participation in the study – Internal or external migration letters</p> <p><b>3. Disconfirmation</b> – Muddled decision-making (incomplete letters, confusion between yes and no condition) – Silent nonparticipation in the study – Implicit critique (letter 3) – internal and external migration letters</p> <p><b>4. Attempts at escaping the double-bind</b> – Symbolic and physical escape (letter 4) – Humor and creativity (letter 5) – E-mails to research team</p>

same content (migration) can be used to serve various functions, as we found letters in this category representing all four possible response options. Migration may indicate *confirmation* when letter writers envision a change in direction in their personal lives or their country as a consequence of the Referendum vote. It may also indicate *rejection* when argued as disappointment and disagreement with the Referendum and its ramifications. However, without such explicit disagreement, some migration letters may also indicate a *disconfirmatory* response that negates by trying to ignore the difficulties. Finally, migration letters may function as (failed) attempts to escape the double bind using meta-communication, humor, and creativity.

### *Constructions of the Referendum*

In this section, we present two different ways of constructing the Referendum, one in which a pragmatic paradox is set-up and one in which the Referendum or its consequences are constructed as contradiction. Unique for the example Letter 1 is that the writer takes the future letter instruction as an opportunity to prepare himself literally for the moment of his upcoming vote. Example Letter 2, however, represents the main function performed in the majority of letters, for example, to use the prospective reflective exercise to reflect on life choices in a possible future after the Referendum. To start with Letter 1, this letter provides a good example of a double bind and describes vividly, with lots of detail, how the writer became entangled.

#### *Letter 1. Identity Struggle in the Voting Booth (man, 22-year-old, unemployed, YES letter)*

The city where I am from  
Three years from now

My dear self,

1. I am in childhood bedroom, it is night-time and I am tired . . . . And as it happens a lot
2. lately, thoughts from the past, old anxieties and dilemmas flooded my mind. How did I
3. get to this point? How did things get to this point? And the most important, where do I
4. go from here. The referendum of 2015 seems like it was so long ago. It is 3 years ago,
5. but in mind it seems like it was in another life. The unrest, anxiety, fear, decision



6. making.

7. I was sure that I would vote NO from the very first moment. The propaganda from the  
 8. channels, the people who supported the “Yes” vote and the manner in which they did  
 9. this, constantly nudged me toward the NO vote. I resisted, struggled, I would choose to  
 10. take the risk rather than to stay in a horrible situation because of cowardice. I  
 11. advertised the NO, I fought for it and that Sunday morning I woke up to go with the  
 12. same fortitude to vote. I was never the type of person who became fanatical with  
 13. political situations, but things had gone too far. . . . I went to the voting centre, and  
 14. decisively entered the voting booth. I had the ballot in my hand, it would not take a  
 15. long time, I had told my parents to wait for me so that we can all leave together. I take  
 16. the pen in my hand and I almost place it on the NO box. But I did not do it. The only  
 17. thing that I remember is putting my vote in the ballot box, having voted yes. What  
 18. happened? How did this happen?

19. As much time as will pass, I will always travel back to that moment, where everything  
 20. transpired without understanding why. I remember my panic. I remember my hand  
 21. trembling. I remember complicated thoughts, “You are going counter to this just to go  
 22. counter,” “You are not making informed decisions,” “You are not thinking of those who  
 23. have much more to lose,” “Are you ready to take the risk, are the others ready?” . . .  
 24. it was the moment that something inside me changed. I recognized that I was not the  
 25. person I believed I was. I was not a rebel. Very difficult days would transpire. . . and I  
 26. deserved them.

27. I finished my studies, tried to find work, the plans for graduate training fell apart  
 28. because of economic difficulties and one failure followed the other. The economic  
 29. situation in the country got worse. . . . But the main reason that I have ended up here  
 30. in my childhood bedroom having given up every hope and dream, was not the political  
 31. situation. It was my vote, the realization of my fear. It was the moment that will  
 32. always haunt me. Because we are our decisions. And I chose fear, hence it will  
 33. accompany me in life. My dear self, who is reading all this, I do not impel you to  
 vote no

34. . . . I advise you though, to think about the person you will become . . . Inside the chaos  
 35. that exists in your brain, try to get rid of fear. Don’t become a coward. Don’t become  
 36. me . . . .

The first condition of a double bind, the creation of vital stakes difficult to elude, is present in, for example, the “propaganda from the channels” (7, 8), the process which “constantly nudged me toward the NO vote” (9), references to resistance, struggle, and strong wording indicating precariousness such as “risk,” “horrible situation,” and “cowardice” (10). The second condition, the pragmatic paradox lies in the intricacies of the command to be a “rebel” (25) instead of a coward. First of all, the rebel identity position of the writer appears to be taken on reluctantly because “I was never the type of person who became fanatical with political situations, but things had gone too far.”

More importantly though, for this identity claim to become a paradoxical one, there appear to be conflicting constructions involved of what it means to be a coward. Is it cowardice to succumb to fear, which is the meaning dominating the interpretation of the unexpected YES vote in the letter? Or, is it cowardice to vote NO, with the risk of economic disaster affecting “those who have much more to lose” (ll. 22–23)? Are not both votes, then, open to the criticism of cowardice? The choice is then not between being a coward and not being a coward but an impossible choice in which either way the writer will be a coward in some sense. Although the cowardice of the NO vote is much less evident, the complicated thoughts he mentions (ll. 21–23) provide further support for the operation of a

paradox. Although the impossibility of meta-communication is not addressed directly, it is implied in various ways. Obviously the impossibility of admitting his surprise YES vote to NO voters is exactly the reason for writing this elaborate letter because of the risk of being accused of being a coward. However, the alternative option of openly admitting to a NO vote appears to be equally difficult in his immediate environment. This difficulty can be deduced from his antipathy of “the people who supported the “Yes” vote and the manner in which they did this” (l. 8).

In the following example (Letter 2), we see a young woman struggling with the consequences of her choice to leave the country and to settle in faraway Australia, a familiar emigration topos for Greeks.

*Letter 2. Torn Between Self-Fulfilment and Connection With Others (woman, 40-year-old, unemployed, YES letter)*

Australia

One year later

My beloved friends and relatives,

1. First of all I feel the need like in all my letters to tell you how much I miss you. Not a
2. moment nor a day passes without thinking of you and not thinking about all that we
3. have shared in our lives . . . . Circumstances are very good here although I have to work
4. a lot. I am very happy however, since I have been able to fulfil my dream [. . .]. The
5. conduct of everyday life and the circumstances here are really different and at the
6. beginning it was initially difficult to adapt, now I have managed. . . I would never
7. have believed that the referendum where I voted YES would have fulfilled one of my
8. dreams and at the same time have distanced me from you all. And the truth is that I
9. feel remorse for my YES since it made things a lot worse for everybody and I left. I had
10. imagined things differently. Please forgive me. Please hang in there. I will support you
11. in any way that I can. . . Financially, but also by trying to do all that is possible so that
12. you can come here. I love you and kiss you and hope that someday I can make
13. reparations . . . .

The tension she is describing between fulfilling her dream and missing her friends and relatives does not really conform to the conditions of a double bind. Without suggesting that her struggle is any less real or painful than those experiencing a pragmatic paradox, the way she constructs her predicament can more correctly be described as a contradiction (Watzlawick et al., 1967, pp. 174–175), which means a choice between two options which both have negative consequences to bear (a loss of self or a loss of connection; see ll. 7–8). Another indication that this is set-up as a contradiction rather than a paradox is that a solution is suggested: Enough money to travel would help assuage the loss of connection (ll. 10–13). Financial issues might not be easy to solve practically, but they do not pose a double bind.

#### *Responding to the Referendum*

In this section, we consequently detail how the three common responses to a pragmatic paradox (confirmation, rejection, and disconfirmation) are represented in the letters, followed by an exploration of the scarcely found responses at the meta-communication level.

First, confirmation can be found in letters which do not question the Referendum query, but rather make a clear-cut choice for either YES or NO. These letters typically construct two polarized alternatives with a clear and convincing narrative about the meaning and consequences about either choice. Second, rejection of the Referendum query was found indirectly by those potential voters who knew about yet refused to participate in our study. While we cannot know the actual size of this group,

some of them e-mailed us about the reasons for not participating in the study, that is, essentially because our research question uncritically mirrored the Referendum query with which they disagreed. The fact that they took time and effort to inform us about their decision not to participate shows their interest in the Referendum and validates the perceived relevance of the study. Arguably nonparticipation can also be a form of disconfirmation in the sense of ignoring the study as well as the Referendum entirely.

This brings us to the third possible response, disconfirmation, which, because of its indirect disqualifying nature is the most difficult to detect in explicit writing. We would tentatively say that disconfirmation was found in some examples of what appeared to be muddled decision-making. This could be found in letters which were not completed (while the questionnaire following afterwards was completed); confusion of the YES and NO future instruction where NO letters were written for the YES condition and vice versa; and two very similar letters for the YES and NO condition thus ignoring the difference without commenting on any experienced indeterminacy between conditions. Moreover, we found disconfirmatory responses by careful analysis of the form and implicit meaning of the letters. Letter 3 below provides such an example of a writer who constructs the Referendum at the explicit level as largely unproblematic and presents herself as “extremely optimistic,” while implicitly expressing critique.

*Letter 3. Disconfirming the NO vote (man, 36-year-old, employed full-time, YES letter)*

My Home, We remain in Greece  
Five years from now

My dear self,

1. I am very glad to be writing this letter, a letter in which I take stock so that I can show
2. you that you did the right thing in voting YES in that Referendum. Do you remember
3. how you had not been informed as to the ramifications of neither of the two available
4. answers? Yes, the one regarding the European measures, now you recall. I am sitting in
5. my little office and my beautiful home that I had been planning for years . . . . What
6. happened to our little Greece? A miracle! Unbelievable, even I the extremely optimistic
7. type could not believe it. Finally, we became a European nation. We have laws that are
8. upheld for everybody, we pay our taxes and we now have corresponding benefits. The
9. streets are clean, people are afraid of tossing garbage all about, the state apparatus
10. operates normally— it imposes fines and it helps people . . . . We are now convinced that
11. the Europeans do not hate us and that they do not want to harm us because they are
12. jealous of our glorious past. The Europeans are now convinced that we are not
13. insolvent, unreliable, unable to handle our own problems, and hence, they are coming
14. here again so that they can enjoy our sun, our souvlakis, our flirting and our culture. In
15. this way I have the chance to keep in touch with other cultures which I so much
16. enjoy! . . .
17. This is what, my dear self I wanted you to know, that I often reflect upon that difficult
18. week when you were called upon to make a difficult decision which would regulate the
19. course of your country and your own future . . . .

In this letter, the legitimacy of the NO-vote argumentation is diminished in a subtle way by largely ignoring and by indirectly downplaying it. This can be seen in the contrast between the initial suggestion on the ambiguity of the two response options (ll. 1–4) and the remainder of the letter in which the writer details the favorable ramifications of the YES vote. Consequently, the ironic way in which the

perception of Europeans is reinterpreted (ll. 10–12) serves to maintain an optimistic tone while effectively presenting a vehement critique of what pejoratively is construed as a petty Greek mind.

*Meta-Communication: Escaping the Double Bind?*

The analysis thus far focused on responses that largely remained within the confines of the double bind. Now we conclude our analysis with two examples of attempts to communicate *about* the double-bind situation by reflecting on the intricacies of an ambiguous choice. Letter 4 provides an example of an attempt to both symbolically (by seeking meta-communication) and physically (by migrating abroad) escape the double bind in the search for a homeland.

*Letter 4: Searching for a Homeland (woman, 42-year-old, employed full time, NO letter)*

England

2030

Dear Reader,

1. I am writing this letter travelling back to the past almost 15 years ago, attempting to
2. reflect how one word (yes or no) impacted mine and my country's fate. I encourage
3. you to watch the film "sliding doors" which deals (or addresses) exactly how fate is
4. determined by chance or from this type of decision making. The question is if both
5. roads lead to the same result. I do not really know if I have the answers; I am missing
6. certain information, lots of facts. I answered no, because I believe that history is
7. written with noes; I replied with no because it was meaningless . . . , without really
8. believing in it and to the ability of a government to change the course of history in
9. these present circumstances. Nevertheless, there is no meaning in the "yes" response
10. after 5 years where every humanitarian ideal was lost, suicides, unemployment and
11. the spiritual blindness of those governing . . . .
12. I left from that beautiful country in search for a homeland where my mind would not
13. suffer from the contradictions. I have found this here but it is not a "homeland". I am
14. once again contemplating going back to Greece, with the thought that the conditions I
15. will find in the country will not "drive me away." A country so loved, but treated so
16. unjustly by all of those who have governed it . . . all! I wonder if that will ever change . . .
17. I hope you reader will never be faced with having to decide the fate of the country
18. without knowing the terms . . . .

Meta-communication is indicated not only by the writer's expressions of doubt (ll. 5–6) but also by her contemplation concerning "if both roads lead to the same result" (l. 4). Her struggle seems to be about believing in "the ability of a government to change the course of history in these present circumstances" (ll. 8–9). With this meta-communicative act, she positions herself as an extension of the government, thereby superimposing an authority to which Greece (and its citizens) is subjected. She exposes the power relations which define the Referendum context and install the double bind, however, all this to no avail ("I wonder. . . without knowing the terms. . ." (ll. 16–18). "without knowing the terms. . ." (l. 18) Finally, her attempt to physically leave the country does not bring solace: While seeking "a homeland where my mind would not suffer from the contradictions," she comes to realize that "it is not a 'homeland'" (ll. 12–13). This might be taken as another paradox where being in the "*homeland*" means both being free from contradictions and suffering from the contradictions that come with being part of the homeland. All in all, this letter shows the difficulties involved in escaping the double bind, rendered on unequal terms.

The following "Don Quixote" letter provides a rare example in our study of a writer attempting to escape the double bind using humor and creativity to extend the frame of reference.

*Letter 5. Don Quixote: Pondering the Meaning of Referendum and Life (man, 29-year-old, employed full time)*

Wherever — where there is land, there is homeland  
10 years from today

Evaki (woman's name),

1. Today is the 10<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of the referendum vote. Do you remember the  
2. referendum? The “no” and the “yes.” I never understood what exactly each choice  
3. connoted and naturally nobody tried to clarify the meaning. It should not surprise us, if  
4. you think about it, just a couple of months prior to the vote, the same people said that  
5. a referendum would bring about the country's bankruptcy, that it meant that we  
6. needed to choose between the Euro and the Drachma, between Europe and out of  
7. Europe. What is there to say? Many times I do not blame you for not occupying your  
8. time with politics. You want to spend your time doing fun things, going out, staying out  
9. late, loving, being loved, and sharing warm moments. All other things are mundane.  
10. They are also solved easily as long as you sit down and work systematically. I  
11. remembered something that Don Quixote used to say: “How is it that such trivial  
12. things that are easily corrected have such power as to prevent and agitate a mature  
13. spirit such as yours?” I got side-tracked though . . . You asked me how I am. Let us say  
14. that I am well. Work from morning until night, you know me. I am still following the  
15. motto that I had adopted when I was really little: “I will not sacrifice my free time on  
16. the altar of nothing” (sometimes I think that I was wiser when I was younger and as I  
17. grow older I lose wisdom). Certainly, I do take care to have fun, I have revised my  
18. values and I allow time for fun . . . . Otherwise, life passes as usual. Poor people are  
19. getting poorer and the rich are getting richer. People find their comfort zone; they  
20. take care of their own; and, they say fuck values such as merit, morality and justice.  
21. They continue to look out for themselves, their micro-interests, and blame others for  
22. their mistakes. Can the referendum change our lives or the course the country has  
23. taken? But why are you posing such silly questions? It is as if someone cut the stem off  
24. a weed and expects that it will not come out again. But, my sweet love, if you do not  
25. take the seed out, if you do not get to the root of the problem, how can you expect that  
26. via the use of the same tactics you will yield different results? And, our seed is utterly  
27. rotten. All right, I do not want to be so tough. I cannot blame people for simply being  
28. people. People . . . weak creatures . . . .

First, the letter is replete with efforts to indirectly establish the authority of the writer. This can be seen in the invocation of an external authority of dubious reputation, for example, Don Quixote (ll. 11–13), a literary figure known as fighter of windmills. The question asked by Don Quixote serves as indirect speech to position the writer (and arguably the reader) as a “mature spirit.” Moreover, the comment between brackets (ll. 16–17) simultaneously presents the writer as wise and unwise, thus both validating (as at the time younger and wiser) and debunking (as a now less wiser writer) his childhood motto: “I will not sacrifice my free time on the altar of nothing” (ll. 15–16).

Second, the form of the letter sets up a playful (and immediately “side-tracked”; l. 13) way of engaging with the profound question posed by Don Quixote (ll. 11–13). The letter could be considered as a highly complex and nuanced way of contemplating and revising what is trivial and what is not. The evaluation “all other things are mundane” (l. 9) seems to construct “doing fun things, going out, staying out late, loving, being loved, and sharing warm moments” (ll. 8–9) as mundane when compared to “occupying your time with politics” (ll. 7–8). This opening of the letter trivializes

the Referendum indirectly because the valued behavior is ascribed to the woman Evaki whom he addresses the letter to in a loving way. She seems to inspire him to revise “my values and I allow time for fun” (ll. 17–18). His efforts to shift focus from “work from morning until night” (l. 14) to more love and play are constructed in contrast with the self-centered values dominating “life . . . as usual” (l. 18). Therefore, the amendment of his values not only requires a revision of his childhood motto (ll. 15–16), but also requires avoiding identification with those who “say fuck values such as merit, morality and justice” (l. 20). At this point, the letter returns to the Referendum, which is now constructed as an instrument of change (ll. 22–23), immediately followed by questioning the validity of this instrument “why are you posing such silly questions?” (l. 23). So, while the Referendum was trivialized in the beginning of the letter, it is now taken deeply to be about no less than the nature of humankind “I cannot . . . weak creatures” (ll. 27–18) and a diagnosis of the status of humanity “our seed is utterly rotten” (ll. 26–27). Overall, the letter’s play with the coexistence of the trivial and the profound is reflected in its nondescript future place which is both mere “land” and idealized “homeland.” This “wherever” may be interpreted as an attempt at expanding the frame of reference by moving into an unknown place and time where change is possible, yet uncertain.

### Conclusions and Discussion

In this article, we proposed a possibility-generating, future-making approach to the Greek Referendum of 2015 conceived of as potential double-bind situation. In answer to the question of how potential voters construct the Referendum, we conclude that while most of the writers constructed dilemma’s arising in life after the Referendum and regarding the vote itself, these do not necessarily take the shape of a double bind. In answer to the question about how potential voters respond to the Referendum query, all four responses (confirmatory, rejection, disconfirmatory and meta-communication) were found with meta-communication being clearly the least prevalent response. These responses, and particularly the relevant lack of meta-communication, adds support to our argument that the Referendum represents a to a large extent latent paradoxical communicative situation. This appears to apply equally to yes and no letters.

Our findings suggests that as a latent situation which is not explicitly recognized by potential voters, the Referendum vote may inadvertently and unknowingly experience even greater distress than they can reflectively and explicitly manage. However, the responses also show how writers use the prospective reflective tool in often nuanced and complex ways to engage with the anticipated (often harsh) consequences of a possible future. By giving space to writers to imaginatively try out possible ways of dealing with their own concerns, we suggest that the *Letters from the Future* indeed facilitate possibility thinking in the face of uncertainty and anxiety. Via the application of “Letters from the Future,” we have tried to substantiate the significance of acknowledging the inherent uncertainty in political decision-making. In particular, the political importance of understanding the future is manifested in its conception as a real site of change and possibility (Grosz, 1999). Theorizing the future as a conceptual space for imagining and working towards political and social change and transformation (Dunmire, 2005), it appears that the methodology we applied facilitates the navigation into uncertainty among participants. It suggests that voters can become more resilient in complex and ambiguous public-policy communication by deploying possibility thinking and constructing narratives about their futures as a means towards political decision-making. Through their narratives, writers of the “Letters from the Future” obtained a storied political existence (Hammack & Pilecki, 2012).

A limitation of our study is that we did no follow-up on how prospective reflection influenced the actual vote, prepared voters for the post-Referendum situation, or whether they would change their imagined futures with knowledge of the outcome of the Referendum (after a resounding “NO” to proposed austerity measures, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras signed in August of 2015 a third memorandum following dramatic negotiations). Such follow-up study could yield deeper insight in the

interrelationship between imagination and practice and into the short-term and long-term impact of the proposed future-making approach. Considering the overrepresentation of women in our study, such follow-up research should also include potential gender differences in the usefulness and effects of the proposed written-reflection instrument.

With so many Referenda being employed all over Europe, it is timely to reflect not only on the political, social, and economic consequences but also on the psychological and ethical consequences of this political instrument. The conditions for the emergence of a double bind might have been particularly strong in Greece in contrast to, for example, a Referendum on the Ukraine in the Netherlands. This is because of the high stakes involved, which are a combination of the historical weight placed upon democracy in Greece, the power imbalance between Greece and its European counterparts, the continuing strong impact of the socioeconomic crisis on the everyday lives of people, and the moral appeal for heroism. Therefore, further research should focus on such contextual differences in the use and usefulness of a future-making approach and the emergence of double binds in particular. The *Letters from the Future* provide an analytical tool for detecting the emergence of double binds, as well as a means for those willing and capable to engage personally with the uncertainty of the future.

To conclude, thanks to the efforts of the participants in our study, we have been able to witness what engagement in prospective reflection in a political voting situation with high stakes might involve and we have seen a glimpse of what it offers. So it is with great respect that we express our hope that their efforts are a beginning that may inspire others.

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