

Language, Gender, and Social Processes

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'If languages have a role in shaping intellectual processes, then what affects language must also indirectly affect these processes and by extension also culture itself.'

Claude Hagège (1998)

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The thematic issue of *Gender and Research* you have in your hands is devoted to *Language, Sex, and Gender*. It presents contributions from the field of contemporary feminist and gender linguistic research in the Czech Republic, offers insights into gender linguistic research in other countries and languages, and reports on their contribution to the de/construction of a gendered image of the world.

Language systems, but for a few exceptions, all developed a stable form within patriarchies. Language is a social construct tied to patriarchy, which both overtly and subliminally co-creates, legitimises, and controls it. Gender acquires meaning to a varying degree and by different means and methods through language usage. Which means and methods and how deeply embedded they are in the system and in speech interactions was given a good illustration in Gerd Brantenberg's novel *Egalia's Daughters* (1977). The Norwegian writer managed to shock readers with her almost impeccable reversal of androcentric discourses into gynocentric ones. The language of *Egalia* is an anonymous instrument of power: it relegates men to the status of a discriminated minority, dehumanises them, and ascribes to them such qualities, activities, professions, ambitions, and domains that women remain in all

respects the privileged gender. Gender roles are institutionalised through the naming, defining, delimiting, and policing power of language; the term 'paternal protection', for example, refers in the novel to the period of time that fathers spend caring for children and do so without proper social and economic recognition. Caring for children must be undertaken even by men who may have had other plans. They have no choice – it is the role of men to provide women with a supportive environment so that women can focus on their career and government. The novel's language is haunting, and, in the view of startled critics, generally unreadable (on this see Valdová 2018: 49–51). The novel's contribution to linguistics was summed up by L. F. Pusch on the cover of the ninth German edition in 2001: 'A rich resource for coursework and master's, doctoral, and other essays'.

The concepts of *doing gender*, *undoing gender*, and *indexing gender* through language (Kotthoff, Nübling 2018: 25–51) are manifested through its system and usage: in prosody and phonology (the biological and cultural determinants of voice), in the category of gender and animacy, in how personal names and different versions of them are formed and used, in the forms used to address and name persons, in the preference for the generic masculine, in the iconic syntax of personal names (men are named first, women are named second), in the use of the diminutive forms of personal names and the terms for people and things, in the choice and distribution of expressive devices according to the gender they are marked with, and in word formation, inflection, and syntax. Gender-marked metaphors and collocations (e.g. 'blond woman', 'woman at the wheel', 'man up') channel the primacy of the male gender. Gender stereotypes evoke concepts in the minds of speakers. The terms 'woman', 'man', 'girl', 'feminist', and many others need first to be stripped of the (unspoken) stereotypes attached to them in order for them to be used meaningfully. The same is true of attributes such as 'ideal', 'normal', 'real', and 'typical' when applied to women or men.

The initial impetus to critically examine the role of language in supporting the patriarchy came from feminist linguistics and occurred in the stormy atmosphere of the discussions that were going on in society in the 1970s. It represented a scientific response to a social demand on the part of publicly active women who were looking for reasons to explain the lower status of their spoken discourse than that of men (Pusch 1979; Trömel-Plötz 1978; Samel 1995). Feminist research (which Socialist bloc countries did not engage in) revealed and defined manifestations of sexism in language. Recommendations were formulated in English, German, and the Romance languages in support of equal treatment in language – for example, in German by Guentherodt et al. (1980) and Wodak et al. (1987). These recommendations have now been institutionalised and have been adopted by individuals, institutions, businesses, unions, organisations, schools, communities, states, and multinational

bodies. Changes in the practices of expression inspired by feminist linguistics were assessed by the *Metzler Lexikon Sprache* (2005: 191) as 'politically motivated linguistic reform that, given its scope, cannot be underestimated'.

Linguistic recommendations for the equal treatment of women and men in the Czech language were formulated by Valdrová in 1998 and were first published in 2001 (and subsequently in 2005 and 2018). They were updated after 2020 to also cover communication with people with non-binary and gender non-conforming identities. Interest in these recommendations has been shown by universities, organisations, businesses, and Czech and multinational corporations. In 2022 the Prague Business Forum organised a workshop for anyone interested in this issue from the fields of industry, business, and communications. The same year the Czech Confederation of Industry and the Czech section of the Directorate-General for Translation of the European Commission in Luxembourg also approached Valdrová with a request for recommendations.

In the anti-feminist climate in the Czech Republic during the 1990s, gender linguistics was met with hostility from the linguistic community and the general public. It was contested and mocked, and it was dismissed as unscientific by staff members at the Institute of the Czech Language, Czech Academy of Sciences (ÚJČ), which is considered the highest linguistic authority in the country with an impact on public opinions and language behavior. S. Čmejrková (member of ÚJČ) referred to the English recommendations for gender-balanced expression in foreign languages as 'a battle between he and she' (Čmejrková 1995: 51) and expressed the hope that the Czech language would resist this. She reduced the issue to a problem affecting languages 'poorer' in terms of grammatical gender (by which she meant English and German). In several of her publications she emphasised the 'erotic fluidity' of Czech, which would, as it were, protect the Czech language from outside influences. Another member of ÚJČ, J. Hoffmannová (1995: 80) expects nothing more from feminist linguistics than interesting grammatical and stylistic evidences; paradoxically, she considered feminist linguistics unnecessary for Czech, if it focusses on 'feminist orientation'.

The first Czech paper in support of research into the relationship between language and gender was presented by Valdrová at a Czech studies conference in 1996. It caused a great stir and in the lively debate that ensued there was talk even of a threat to the identity of the Czech language and nation. The significance of the suggestion to use gender-balanced expressions was nevertheless recognised by a participant from a business college: 'Why wouldn't I use them if in doing so I can connect better with my target group?'

In 2002 S. Obersteiner, a Slavic studies expert at the University of Vienna, noted that the attitude of Czech academic institutions, and the Institute for the Czech Language foremost among them, was 'nowhere near to taking feminist linguistics seriously

or applying its findings to Czech'. It was not easy to publish in Czech linguistics and literary journals either or apply for grants on gender linguistics. In one rejected grant application, the anonymous reviewer suggested that there was no need to provide support for a linguistic problem that had been imported into the Czech language environment. The anonymous reviewer of an article Valdrová submitted to *Slovo a slovesnost* suggested, without any explanation, that she delete from the abstract a sentence that read '...gender-linguistic studies should be supported at Czech universities because it provides valuable socio-cultural knowledge'. The leading figure in Czech language studies and member of ÚJČ F. Daneš (1997), responded to Valdrová's articles with a plea for common sense.

A lack of understanding about the purpose and goals of gender linguistics has been demonstrated on multiple occasions by M. Pravdová (ÚJČ) in her published work. In a television debate titled 'Kojný ani prostatička smysl nedávají smysl'¹ (2014, Czech Television 24) Pravdová parodies gender-fair language by forming senseless personal nouns. In 2015, the view that Austrian Slavist I. Ohnheiser encountered at Charles University was that [gender-fair language is] 'an insult to the Czech language' and 'a mockery of Prague linguistics' and amounts to 'spitting on the grave of Roman Jakobson'.

The community of Czech studies scholars was reluctant to acknowledge the legitimacy of gender linguistics, even though it was never able to prove that Czech should be an exception among languages and was immune to unequal treatment of sex and gender. This resistance culminated in an attempt to drive gender linguistics out of educational institutions. In 2010, the Ministry of Education published on its website a handbook by Valdrová, Knotková-Čapková, and Paclíková on the principles of gender-balanced language in Czech formulated by Valdrová. For an orientation in foreign languages, the handbook also contained advice on gender-balanced language in German and English. The Ministry of Education then received a request from fourteen Czech studies scholars spearheaded by R. Adam to remove the handbook from the website, as its content allegedly deviated from the concept of linguistic communication and in places contradicted what was being taught in school curricula.

Gender linguistics has encountered obstacles in the Czech Republic that perhaps no other field in the country has had to contend with. This situation has been analysed by Valdrová (2018: 57–91), and she has also criticised the aforementioned petition,

¹ The title would roughly translate as 'The terms "wet-nurseman" and "woman with a prostate problem" make no sense' – the terms in quotation marks are each expressed in Czech with a single word for a person, to which a gender suffix could be added or omitted to mark the person as male or female; the default form of the first term is female, but here has a male suffix, and the second one is male, here with a female suffix.

which serves as sad testimony to the scientific shortsightedness of its signatories, among whom are individuals who teach at universities (ibid.: 337–341). It is not surprising, therefore, that students who have shown an interest in research in this field have heard from their teachers in response that ‘our society is not ready for gender linguistics’ or have at best been told to ‘choose another topic, we don’t understand this here’.² In 2016, Vít Kolek had to go to considerable effort to get the university to accept his decision to focus his doctoral thesis on gender linguistics. It must, however, also be acknowledged that in 2010 Palacký University was the only Czech academic institution besides the Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences that stood up for researching language from a gender perspective.

Despite its rocky start, the field of gender linguistics has since earned a solid reputation. Students have not been deterred from making gender and language the subject of their bachelor’s and master’s theses, which is evident from the many references to this topic at www.theses.cz. Lectures, seminars, and workshops on the subject enjoy high attendance rates. Gender linguistics has expanded to include queer linguistics – the linguistic study of heteronormativity and, among others, non-binary identities, which is Vít Kolek’s area of specialty (e. g. Kolek 2022). In Czech society and legislation, gender-onomastic research is exceptionally informative, but to date has only been explored by Valdrová (2018, 2019, and the article in this thematic issue)

As for other Slavic languages, in some of them research on the linguistics of gender and sexual identities is still in its early stages, while in others there is much more activity in this field. There are also differences between countries in how the subject and the related language practices are viewed by the scientific community and the general public. The German Slavic studies scholar D. Scheller-Boltz (2019) points to Slovenian, Croatian, Czech, and Slovak as languages in the Slavic language space that have a relatively rich publication base and available anti-discrimination language tools that can be applied as required. In Russian, Serbian, and Belarusian, on the other hand, current language practices are still androcentric, and a critical gender perspective is often lacking, while gender linguistics is marginalised or has been outright rejected. Research in gender linguistics in the Slavic languages in general lags behind that in Western countries. A key role in this is played by historical-political and sociocultural factors, and by the ostensibly irresolvable problem of the typological characteristics and complexity of Slavic inflection, which is in fact more about an unwillingness to address the issue (cf. Valdrová 2013).

The aim of this thematic issue on *Language, Gender and Sex* is to demonstrate the role that language plays in shaping reality and in bringing about the social changes that necessarily attend a change in language use. The issue opens with the article

² As Valdrová indicated in interviews around the year 2010.

'Gender Neutral Proper Names: Current Situation and Perspectives' by Jana Valdrová, who is also a court expert on names and specialises in gender-neutral names. In this article she analyses the practices at the registry offices that record births, deaths, and marriages in the Czech Republic, which follow the instructions of M. Knappová on dealing with personal names, and she reveals the consequences of the current concept of gender-neutral names: according to Knappová's instructions gender-neutral given names are assigned only to trans people, whereby the names and trans people have become stigmatised. She set aside a specific circle of surnames for trans people, and as a result the gender difference is readily apparent from their names and surnames. She denies gender-neutral names to the majority population, thus denying the names' universal function. Knappová's approach has turned names into a sinister instrument for disclosing intimate personal information and marginalising trans people.

Lujza Urbancová, the author of 'Gender-Balanced Slovak in Contemporary Society', investigates to what extent Slovak society is ready to express itself in gender-balanced terms. She examines the attitudes of professional communities and the general public in Slovakia and notes the conservative attitude that the Slovak public has towards language, but also the potential for inclusive language in the field of managerial and advertising communication, which seeks to address target groups in more direct ways than other turns of phrase used to now do. The linguistic community and state and cultural institutions could play an important role in motivating 'privileged' groups, who still make do with the use of androcentric language, to change their speech and adopt more gender-sensitive language.

In 'Person Reference and Gender (Non-)Binarity: A Quantitative Survey of the Front Pages of Czech Periodicals', Vít Kolek examines the extent to which gender-balanced and inclusive language has made it onto the front pages of selected Czech periodicals. He shows that the very common and still existing practice of using the generic masculine to refer to persons is unreliable and inaccurate and does not meet the requirements for clarity of expression (cf. Dittmann 2002). Paired forms, which are characteristic of gender-balanced (binary) language use (and common, for example, in Austrian German), were not used at all in the Czech periodicals studied, while there was only a small number of examples of the use of gender-neutral forms of reference to persons. If gender-inclusive forms occurred at all (e.g. names of institutions instead of masculine names of persons), they were evidently not motivated by attempts at gender-sensitive expression. It is nevertheless useful to highlight their use in authentic texts. Kolek also focuses on the treatment of foreign women's surnames and how (un)necessary it is to inflect foreign surnames with a feminine suffix to identify the persons as women.

Three articles in the issue are in English and their common denominator is the use of corpus linguistics tools. Claudia Posch's paper 'Women Who Climb – A Corpus

Linguistic Tour Description with Potential Danger Zones' draws on the Austrian mountaineering magazine *Zeitschrift des Österreichischen Alpenvereins*. The author's combination of a historical approach to discourse analysis and feminist and corpus linguistics is unusual in linguistics to date because of how challenging it is from an interdisciplinary point of view. Posch diachronically analyses the representation of women and femininity in this Austrian mountaineering magazine extending back to 1870. She finds that although women are increasingly represented in the magazine over time, it is largely in the traditional patriarchal roles of mountaineers' wives, expressed through subtle practices such as the use of possessive pronouns or in constructions using the preposition 'with'. Later, probably also under the influence of second-wave feminism, women are represented more frequently, but still only within thematic articles and issues as a specific group. Posch concludes her paper by noting that in mountaineering magazines men appear as the norm, whereas women are still the exception.

Karoline Irschara is the author of the article 'Using a Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies Approach to Analyse Gender: A Case Study of German Radiology Reports', in which she deals with gender-linguistics research of an extensive corpus of radiology reports written in German. Irschara first analyses the keywords in discussions and reports on female and male patients. Although these are standardised texts, the author notes differences in the medical communication depending on whether the patient is male or female. She finds, for example, that the attribute 'chronic' is much more often applied to the substantive 'pain' if the patient is a woman. She encountered use of the classifier 'subjective' only in the case of women and it may signal a relativisation of a woman's pain. The article is an important impetus for carrying gender-sensitive approaches much further in medicine (and perhaps will be used for this purpose). As with the paper by C. Posch, it is an illustrative example of the subliminally hierarchising effects of language.

The authors of the article 'Corpus-Linguistic Analysis of Speech Communities on Anti-Gender Discourse in Slovene' are Damjan Popič and Vojko Gorjanc. They analysed anti-gender discourse in Slovenia in three corpora, focusing on the terms gender ideology and gender theory, the latter being used more frequently. Popič and Gorjanc documented the use of both terms in positive or neutral but mainly negative contexts. Since (to use L. Wittgenstein's phrase) the meaning of a term is determined by its use, the term gender theory, which is repeatedly found in a negative, anti-gender sense, can greatly confound the public, and this then has implications for gender studies in general. Much of the discourse analysed comes from social media, particularly Twitter. The authors confirm the thesis that Twitter communities share common values and ideological beliefs – here in anti-gender and anti-LGBT+ attitudes - and further reaffirm each other's views.



The thematic issue concludes with a review by Martin Stegu of a book edited by Dennis Scheller-Boltz and Tilmann Reuther and published in 2019 that focuses on current trends in anti-discrimination and gender discourse in Slavic languages.


With this thematic issue devoted to gender linguistics, which is probably the first Czech publication of its kind, we want to reach out to everyone who is interested in the relationship between language and gender and motivate them in the pursuit of interdisciplinary research. In doing so *Gender and Research* is working to help change the unacceptable state of affairs that currently exists, where the number of doctoral theses in the field of gender linguistics in the Czech Republic can be counted on the figures of one hand. We sincerely thank the editors for this opportunity. We would also like to thank Zuzana Uhde, Marie Heřmanová, and all the reviewers for their insightful comments, which contributed significantly to the quality of the published papers in these pages.

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