

## **“Demented suicide attacks” on a “naturally and organically grown German language” and consequential appeals for “life-sustaining defensive actions” – Metaphors employed in the discourse on gender-inclusive language**

The topics of gender-fair or -inclusive language have experienced a reactualization in the German-speaking area during the past years. This is related to discourse-relevant social developments: In Germany, e.g., the decision on the so-called Third Option (‘Dritte Option’) and thus the legal recognition of the diversity of gender beyond the binary of women and men and related questions about how to express this reality linguistically. Currently, similar discussions are taking place in Austria and Switzerland. Furthermore, in 2017 there was the controversially discussed publication of the Duden guidebook on gender-fair language “Richtig Gendern” (Diewald/Steinhauer), by which an institution perceived as the leading German authority on language positioned itself in the discourse. But it should not be forgotten that the topic has been accompanied by controversial and emotional debates from the very beginning, both within the Germanic linguistics community but also socially. With regard to related public discussions Beck speaks of a “medienübergreifender Aufreger”, i.e. ‘a troublemaker across all media’, (2020, 83).

In my research I consider the metaphors used in this discourse, because successful metaphors make it easier to create convincing rhetoric. However, I do not interpret metaphors as rhetorical but rather as cognitive means (Lakoff/Johnson 2003), which serve to make something abstract vivid and comprehensible. Metaphors „serve as an unreflected – and thus dogmatic – authentication of collectively received commonplace theories on social contexts, which provide templates for life direction and serve to legitimize individual and collective conduct“ („[sie] dienen der – unreflektierten und insofern dogmatischen – Beglaubigung kollektiv konstituierter Alltagstheorien über je soziale Zusammenhänge, liefern Leitfäden zur Lebensorientierung und legitimieren Handeln bei Individuum und Gemeinschaft“, Pielenz 1993, 176).

In the respective discourse(s), associations dedicated to ‘language maintenance’ are particularly relevant (c.f. Pfalzgraf 2019, 2006; Spitzmüller 2005; Stukenbrock 2005, 2003; Wirth 2010). These associations can be understood as discourse communities and as ideology brokers. Ideology brokers are understood as central discourse-controlling actors: “[...] categories of actors who, for reasons we set out to investigate, can claim authority in the field of debate ([...] interest groups, academicians [...])” (Blommaert 1999, 9). They know the conditions and the topic setting of media and use this knowledge to enforce their goals, often also enhancing their own discourse position and devaluing the position of others. Politically, such associations are therefore to be taken seriously. Their activities are regularly referred to in other media, i.e., they influence the formation of public opinion.

In my presentation, I explore which metaphors have been used in the discourse around gender-inclusive language among associations since 1990 and I discuss whether there are differences between the three German speaking countries and at different points in time. This is according to the presupposition that metaphors are dependent on their socio-cultural context (Pielenz 1993, 87). Metaphors can be understood as ‚curdled expression of prevailing opinions‘ („geronnener Ausdruck herrschender Meinungen“, *ibid.*, 132). They can be the driving forces for conduct, they establish contexts of meaning, form interpretive aids for everyday life, and legitimize actions. If e.g., gender-inclusive language is metaphorized as *unnatural self-harm* or even *suicide* and language is depicted as an *organism* that has grown quasi-evolutionarily, the tasks of combating these acts of violence and the nurturing of language are logical and necessary responses.

The journals of three German-language language maintenance associations from the last 3 decades provide the basis for my analyses. In Germany the „Verein Deutsche Sprache“, in Austria the „Verein Muttersprache“ and in Switzerland the „Schweizerischer Verein für die Deutsche Sprache“. All associations deal with the topic of gender-inclusive language, in Austria and Switzerland already for

more than 30 years. Their positions and argumentations can be seen as representative for the public and partly also linguistic discourse.

Since the meta-linguistic discourse around gender-inclusive language is controversial, it is not surprising that metaphors of violence and threat derived from different areas of origin predominate, e.g. the area of disease – *delusion, hysteria* – and that of war – *victories won against the gender police*. The metaphorizations refer to different target areas, such as the object of the discourse (*gender-hysteria*), its representatives (*gender-crazed feminists*) and the German language (*miracle*) itself. There are also various cross-connections between the different metaphorical areas.

The debate itself is conceptualized as the site of the struggle over language. The actors involved are illustrated as *opposing camps* that are hostile to each other. The actors of the associations take the position of *protectors who defend* the language against attacks from out- and inside.

Metaphors from the area of sexual violence are frequently used – there is talk of the *rape* of the German language and its *abuse*. Language is stylized here as a purely female body. Gender-inclusive language is portrayed as *dangerous, destructive*, and even as a *murderer* of a language imagined as *alive*.

The linguistic devices under debate have changed during the past 50 years – the focus has shifted from making women visible to linguistically acknowledging the diversity of gender. So, in turn, the metaphors employed have shifted. The metaphor of *illness*, in particular mental illness, for example, refers directly to the concept of gender. The frequently depicted *hysteria* is a pathology that was historically explicitly attributed to women, who in this way could be marginalized as unaccountable. Also regular references to *delusion* are used to describe a turning away from reality, where threats are seen that do not exist. These narratives are particularly powerful tools for the devaluation of the opposing party, as the depiction of insanity implies that factual discussions are not possible.

It becomes clear that metaphors express personal and social evaluations, i.e. they are used argumentatively. As a „routinized argumentation depot“ („routinisiertes Argumentationsdepot“ Pielenz 1993, 137), metaphors refer to topoi (Wengeler 2003). At the same time, the metaphors occurring in the discourse on gender-inclusive language are linked to slogans and stigmas (Hermanns 1994). Their analysis gives an understanding of prevailing collective perceptions and attitudes towards the topic gender-inclusive language at different times.

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