

On the "invention" of *the* gender language

For some time now, the topic of gender-inclusive language use has been the subject of sometimes highly emotionalised and polarised debates in a wide variety of contexts in Germany but especially in the media with actors and institutions of all kind voicing their attitudes towards it. In the discourse, designations such as „der Gendersprech“ (roughly „the gender talk“) or „das Gendern“ (roughly „the gendering“) (e.g. Krischke 2021; Schwab 2021; Stein 2021) can be found, invoking notions of gender-inclusive language being a separate, definable form of language, especially given the definite articles used to describe these forms of language use.

The aim of the presentation will be to reconstruct these definite (linguistic) constructions and the associated attributions of as well as the prevailing patterns of argumentation around gender-inclusive language forms for a German-speaking context. We aim at showing that in media debates around the issue, which often-times are focussing on questions of “yes” or “no” with regard to gender-inclusive language use, a homogenization of various forms and possibilities of gender-inclusive language can be found, resulting in reduced (and reducing) notions of the ‚gender talk‘, both by those opposing and those favouring it.

To do so, the presentation will give a brief overview of the system of gender marking in the German language, showing its “obsession” (Kotthoff/Nübling 2018: 19) with gender and different constraints, possibilities and ways of gender-inclusive language, such as dual nomination, neutralisations (e.g. compound nouns with -kraft or -person or participle nominalisation) or so called non-binary forms using signs (e.g. the asterisk or the colon) before the feminine suffix with the aim of representing other than male and female genders in language.

Although there is therefore a variety of forms usable and used for gender-inclusive language with different levels of salience, only few elements, such as the asterisk as a typographic or the glottal stop as an oral realization are debated in the broader medial discourse, as the presentation will show. Thus, they could be characterized as shibboleths for “das Gendern”. Following Androutsopoulos (2011), we can therefore speak of an invention of the gender language by opposing parties in media discourses, each constructing what they understand as the ‘gender talk‘; a process that is not limited to actors opposing gender-inclusive language use. These constructs are subject to stancetaking and evaluations in the argumentations. To show these processes we will draw on Spitzmüller's (2013) model of metapragmatic positioning. However, while Spitzmüller (2013: 283) in his model, using the example of netspeak, speaks of a language use that is already sedimented as one interpretative construct with a specific social meaning and is thus already a register in the sense of "culture-internal models of personhood linked to speech forms" (Agha 2007: 135), the thesis will be elaborated that gender-inclusive language is not (yet?) one socially sedimented and fixed register. Rather, ongoing enregistration processes and evaluations suggest that there are different notions of gender-inclusive language use that can be found in the debate which are associated with different types of persons and conduct, depending on the favoured construct. With Agha (2005: 35) one may define these ‘invented’ or constructed ways of using gender-inclusive language as “enregistered voices”, coming from different perspectives and stances taken towards it.

The function of these constructs is primarily a socio-pragmatic one, because the idea – and invention in our terms – of an identifiable ‚special language‘ enables social positioning to it and the persons and actions associated with it (Spitzmüller 2013: 284). The types of persons and conduct associated with the respective language forms of gender-inclusive or generic usage of masculine forms that are thought of as a special language are then the basis for various pro- and contra-positionings. Using first data from German public broadcast (Deutschlandfunk) and newspapers published in Germany the presentation will show these associations of different usage of forms of gender-inclusive language with persons and conducts in the discourse, the stances taken towards them and the

discursive struggle over the 'correct' form of speech, analysing the argumentations this struggle is based upon using topos analysis.

References

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