

English as a model of neutrality?

Taking as a point of reference research meant to deconstruct the language myths underlying language ideology (Watts 2011), the present paper examines current attitudes regarding gender-inclusive language in Romania. In its focus on language myths, the paper lays particular emphasis on the keywords employed in the representation of “language” and “(grammatical) gender” in the Romanian media. Underlining the role of translation from English (at its interface with language ideology) as well as the impact of global English on the way in which nonbinary and LGBTQI+ identity in general is expressed in Romanian (for example the abundant use of English loanwords and code switching between Romanian and English by members of the LGBTGI+ community), the paper focuses on current attitudes regarding (the making of) gender-inclusive language, in the attempt to discuss the significant role played by language myths such as “homogeneity” and “superiority” (Watts 2011).

A Romance language based on a grammatical gender system, Romanian has been perceived as “codifying binary gender norms” (Chirciu 2022) by the representatives of the LGBTQI+ community in Romania, who have underlined the need for a gender-inclusive language which would allow nonbinary persons to become “visible” (A term often used in both the traditional and social media in Romania regarding LGBTQI+ identity). In spite of the efforts and initiatives of current Romanian LGBTQI+ organisations, the present absence of widely available explicit guidelines concerning gender-inclusive language in Romania leads to a challenging situation regarding the most appropriate norms in this respect. Moreover, Romanian has three nominal agreement classes, namely “masculine/neuter/feminine”, but only a binary gender opposition between feminine and masculine concerning pronouns and concerning agreement with adjectives, participles and determiners (see Croitor and Giurgea 2009). The pronominal and agreement choices meant to make nonbinary persons “visible” in Romanian, choices which have so far followed gender-inclusive models adopted in other languages, are at this time present only in a limited number of texts (the majority of which have been issued by LGBTQI+ organizations) and are not widely known by the Romanian public or taken into account by current normative grammars or by the authorities involved in language policy.

For a better understanding of the Romanian context, the paper will first offer a brief discussion of current attitudes (expressed in the Romanian media between 2018 and 2022) which see the efforts towards a gender-inclusive language as “absurd” and “ridiculous”. The attempt will be to underline the centrality in this discourse of the myths of homogeneity and superiority (see Watts 2011 for a discussion of these myths) in the representation of Romanian as a “particular”, “independent” language, and of gender-inclusive language as “artificial” and “mixed”. The analysis will then centre upon the attitudes of the promoters of gender-inclusive language, with particular emphasis on Gender Talk, which is a series of Romanian podcasts focusing on language and gender. The paper will discuss the way in which these attitudes are based on the one hand upon transcending “homogeneity”, and rely upon a more fluid, “global” view of language/identity. On the other hand, the paper will examine the way in which these attitudes, whose central metaphor is that of “developing” a new language, rely upon a representation of (global) English as a model of a gender-inclusive language (“English as a logical language”, “English as a gender-neutral language”).

References

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