

## “GENDER\_LANGUAGE\_POLITICS” SYMPOSIUM<sup>1</sup>

At the initiative of Ruth Wodak, the University of Vienna focused on gender during its 650th anniversary celebration. The readers of SALi probably know Ruth Wodak as one of the founders and prominent scholars in the field of critical discourse analysis (CDA), however, she has also been studying gender-related issues during her scholarships in Vienna and Lancaster. The 2015 anniversary programme was concluded by Gender\_Language\_Politics, an interdisciplinary international symposium which took place on 22–23 October 2015. The symposium was attended by twenty scholars<sup>2</sup> who offered various perspectives on the representation of women in public space.

The agenda covered a range of issues — gender equality in language, religious and political aspects of gender, the role of gender in contemporary right-wing populism, its visualization in TV series and fiction media, or East-West politics regarding gender relations — from the perspective of linguistics, sociology, political science, or media and gender studies. In terms of discourse theory, the contributions were based on various approaches to exploring gender and its discursive aspects (e.g., from corpus and conversation analysis to CDA and viscourse<sup>3</sup> studies) and many of them went beyond the fields’ conventional boundaries. In our report, we are going to introduce particularly those contributions which referred (at least to some extent) to language and/or its usage in discourse.

The keynote on *Beyond Sexism: Why Journalists always Write about Women’s Hair and Clothes — and Probably always Will* delivered by Deborah Tannen represented one of such contributions. According to Tannen, unlike men, women are always discursively constructed and judged by their appearance (clothes and hair) regardless of the irrelevance of this practice to their public roles. As a consequence, such construction trivializes their performance as well as professional accomplishments. When seeking for a cause of the persistence of such patterns, Tannen highlights the lack of a “neutral choice” option for women. Women’s style of clothing and hair is always marked, to use a linguistic term. In addition, their markedness always refers to the un/fulfilment of a socio-sexual role society ascribes to them (*being sexy but not too sexy*). Unmarkedness (such as a dark suit and a tie in the context of politics) is available to men only. As a matter of fact, when explaining the concept of un/markedness Tannen draws a parallel to the generic masculine mentioned and explored in a range of subsequent contributions. Those were devoted to deconstruction of religious-symbolic or stereotypical characteristics of real-life women (politicians) or TV series characters, acknowledging the importance of the concept in the current debate on women in public space.

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1 This paper has been written as an outcome of a subproject entitled De/politicized: a case study of politicization and depoliticization of (un)equal representation of women in Czech politics, elaborated at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University, and funded under Charles University Specific Research in 2015.

2 The ratio of female to male scholars was approximately 1:5.

3 Sociologist of visual communication Eva Flicker was a proponent of using the term *viscourse* (i.e. visual discourse).



One of the first feminist critics of language in the German-speaking context, Luise F. Pusch, presented several short satirical pieces which she had produced along with scholarly analyses. In her *Glossen*, she tackled some pitfalls of the generic masculine with respect to the invisibility of women in language, and depicted different aspects of speech and semiotic practices from the feminist perspective.

In his introductory remarks to a panel on *Discrimination through Language: Feminist and Queer Positions*, Martin Stegu presented some ways of coping with such instances of gender-related discrimination through (German) language which make women invisible. For example, the plural form of the word *Lehrer* (teachers) has relatively well-known gendered alternatives such as explicit use of both genders (*Lehrer und Lehrerinnen*), a hybrid form with so called *Binnen-I* (*LehrerInnen* with a glottal stop before the *-Innen* suffix) and also neutralization strategies employing a nominalized adjective (*Lehrende*), the depersonalized *Lehrpersonen* or periphrases such as *wer lehrt* (who teaches) etc.<sup>4</sup> Lately, some new linguistic structures have emerged, including graphic variants of the *Binnen-I* such as *Lehrer\_innen*, *Lehrer\*innen* and *Lehrer-innen* (all of them denote empty space on the male-female continuum) or the entirely “gender-sterilized” forms of *Lehr\**, *Lehrx* or *Lehroq*.

With her contribution entitled, “*Binnen-I be gone*” — a *New Wave of Refusal with Old Arguments*, Claudia Posch followed up on two recent language-related debates in Austria — on the usage of the *Binnen-I* as a new form an anti-discriminatory language and on a change in lyrics of the Austrian national anthem.<sup>5</sup> Engaged with a CDA approach, she presented an instructive deconstruction of the argumentative patterns of these debates, exposing an inter-disciplinary conflict of linguistics and gender studies, which were intended, based on their authoritative expertise, to resolve the puzzle of anti-discriminatory language. Unlike the “modernisation” of the national anthem, the *Binnen-I* has not been adopted yet.

In his presentation on *Attitudes towards Gender-Fair Language and Discrimination: Empirical Findings, Theoretical Reflections, Practical Recommendations*, Christoph Hofbauer acquainted the participants with two large-N surveys he conducted among students and staff of the Vienna University of Economics and Business. His research design elicited an interesting methodological discussion about the adequacy and acceptance of applying in the questionnaire the male-female binarity for respondent’s self-identification when studying anti-discrimination discourse. The researcher was criticized for legitimizing simplistic notions of gender identities and neglecting their responsibility for co-constructing the discourse he explores. The

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4 These strategies are certainly also well-known in Czech gender linguistics (with some variations such as splitting the word instead of capitalizing a letter in the middle of the word). Yet in this context, we suppose German with its grammar system poses fewer problems in terms of formulation etc.

5 Since the 1990s, Austrians led a debate on gender imbalance in their national anthem due to the following line of the first verse, *Heimat bist du großer Söhne* (‘you are home to great sons’). In 2012, the word *Töchter* (‘daughters’) was added to the official lyrics, *Heimat großer Töchter und Söhne* (‘home to great daughters and sons’). Nevertheless, the controversies surrounding the modification have remained.



author himself asserted he had deliberately aimed at imitating conventional survey forms — such that are perceived by business-oriented respondents as “neutral” — to avoid drawing special attention to this item in the questionnaire. This debate illustrates the sensitivity of gender-related research and exposes the dilemmas of activist or critical approaches to science. Researchers have to compromise, build their field research upon the existing social reality, and hence accept and re-produce it to a certain extent.

Apart from these contributions, the symposium did not offer more from its internal linguistic focus. However, the rest of the speakers were concerned with usage of language or other semiotic codes in the broader sense. In his paper entitled, *The Populist Representation of Us and Others in Finland and Sweden: A Comparative Study of Intersectional Differences in Populist Parties’ Newspapers*, political sociologist Cristian Norocel showed how right-wing populist party newspapers in Finland and Sweden discursively construct an “us–others” opposition based on gender, class, ethnicity, race, and nation references and how meanings of different identity categories are performed intersectionally. Based on corpus analysis, he depicted the significance of particular concepts (e.g., EU, feminism etc.) for the parties and their self/identification. His analysis demonstrated that the concept of gender equality is a “myth” used and misused by the populist parties in order to construct their collective identity, for instance by neutralization of gender.

Ironically, by making reference to Oscar Wilde’s statement, “A man’s face is his autobiography — A woman’s face, her work of fiction?”, Erzsébet Barát analysed a recent case from the Szeged University in Hungary whose chancellor posted on his Facebook profile a picture of a boat with a group of young naked women aboard accompanied by the following text in Polish: *Nareszcie normalni imigranci* (‘finally normal migrants’). In her analysis, she referred to reframing of the case — although at the beginning, a sexist meaning of the story was emphasized, later the media associated the chancellor’s resignation with the migration crisis debate and with political quarrels.<sup>6</sup> Such a banalization of the problem has contributed to its dismissal — in spite of its symbolic importance, the case has drawn only limited attention.

In her paper, *A Critical Discourse Analysis of Gender Stereotype Comments on Taiwanese Female Politicians*, Jennifer M. Wei investigated what nominations and arguments are used in comments on women presidential candidates in Taiwan and how they form normative expectations towards female politicians.

Finally, we find it proper to remark that the term “symposium” does not denote a scientific conference where one would apply rigid scientific criteria on research projects and results presented. A range of contributions introduced interesting projects or events in public space, positive as well as negative ones, without a more in-depth analytical insight or an explicit account of their methodological background. In the context of the public engagement and activism related to gender studies, this

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<sup>6</sup> The (potential) political aspect of the case rests on the current reform of higher education law in Hungary which empowers the government to nominate university chancellors. This governmental discretion is considered as an instrument of undue political surveillance and influence.



approach is natural or at least understandable. In the concluding remarks, some participants reproached a rather sporadic discussion about methodological questions within the symposium. Ruth Wodak noted that the methodology had been partly neglected indeed, however, to conduct a systematic methodological debate, the session would have had to be organised in a different, less inclusive and more interactive format which would have been more demanding in terms of time and organisation. Nevertheless, despite the lack of common methodological ground, the interdisciplinarity of the panels and the thematic diversity of contributions presented, no misunderstandings, so typical for debates on discourse, emerged.

The symposium demonstrated how topical the theme of gender is as a research subject, and in particular as an inherent part of contemporary social reality which deserves and requires change not only in language but also on the political stage. In the context of Europe's demographic dynamics and the intersectionality of inequalities, it seems both substantial and challenging for researchers to raise these questions.

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