

Current trends in the media: gender-inclusive language

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Abstract

One of the most important functions of mass media is providing information to its recipients. In this context, language of media plays a key role, together with changes in the society that have an impact on the language used. The paper deals with contemporary trends that may be seen in media speech, especially the phenomenon of political correctness, especially the hot issue of gender identity and gender-sensitive language, while paying attention to differences that may be seen in various languages, mainly Slovak. The English language, which currently serves the function of *lingua franca*, takes a prominent position in all these trends, and the alternations in English subsequently fundamentally influence other languages.

Keywords: language of media, media linguistics, political correctness, gender-inclusive language, English as *lingua franca*

Introduction

Media has undoubtedly become an important part of our professional and private lives. People all around the globe consume various types of media messages on everyday basis. Despite progress in new technologies, it is yet the language which plays a fundamental role in communicating by media. It is important to mention that in our times media texts have become the most common forms of the existence of a language. Therefore, language users are often exposed to them and in many aspects may serve as a model for composing their own utterances. Moreover, authentic media texts are extremely useful for language learners who have a unique chance to consume original texts providing up-to-date information. Media language has been closely connected to our reality, since media provide hot news, describe stories that are of importance for their audiences. Thus, our present reality, problems of our society, new topics and trends that appear contribute to changes in media language, which can be clearly seen if being exposed to older media messages, where not only slightly different language was used, but also other issues were paid attention to.

1 Language of media

Due to the frequency of occurrence and general relevancy, language used in media and by media has been an object of linguistic attention and research for decades. In this context, in Slovak conditions, we may traditionally come across the term journalistic style (Mistrík, 2021), in the English linguistics the concept of newspaper English as one of language registers is to be found (Biber et al, 2004). To put it simply, language used in media has its own vocabulary and syntactical constructions, which are closely related to the purpose of the text and the specific conditions of communication applied here. In other words, function of the utterance is of high importance. With the development of new technologies, changes in media functioning, and advance of the society, nowadays, the idea of media linguistics seems to be the most modern approach for linguistic research (Berdimurodovich, 2022). There comes to broadening of the scope for researchers – in addition to analysing media messages, including feedback, it is considered vital to investigate the process of origin of the media content, its effect on audiences and the general public, and also its impact on media education and on developing media literacy (Škvareninová, 2021, p.119). All these shifts have been determined by the onset of digital mass media, which turned mass media into omnipresent phenomena. Thus, media linguistics is also related to linguistics, sociolinguistic, culture science, or psychology, while focusing on studying media speech and the language of mass media.

2 Political correctness in media language

Apart from the technological progress, one of the most important factors influencing media language is the phenomenon of political correctness, which may be understood as the principle of avoiding offending the previously discriminated groups of people in a society (Browne, 2009). Originally, it was meant to implement language free of

any bias, discrimination, prejudice, and while using such language in media, to show the audiences a certain model of proper language norms and ultimately make our world a better place to live (Ungerová & Škvareninová, 2022, p. 45). The areas affected by the political correctness include mainly races, nationalities, work and workplaces, mental and physical disabilities, and religions. It is definitely desirable to try to change the language used in a way to avoid offensive terms and to try to make everybody feel welcome, accepted and equal. Nevertheless, soon after being put into practice, first problems with implementing the ideas of political correctness into media language started to occur, bringing along fundamental questions, such as following: Who (person, authority, institution) is to decide what is and what is not politically correct? Can artificial changes to the language be imposed upon ordinary language users? What should happen if people do not adhere to politically correct language? (Ungerová & Škvareninová, 2022, p. 47). It is virtually impossible to cover all the areas affected by the notion of political correctness within one study, thus we have decided to focus on one important and highly controversial area – gender and sex. The discussions about the so-called non-gendered, gender-sensitive or gender-inclusive language in the public discourse, including media, started to be held with the arrival of ideas related to the concepts of feminism and gender identity. Just like political correctness, the notion of feminism is complex and there are several definitions available. For the purpose of this paper, we understand feminism as the endeavour to reduce gender inequality and to promote the interests of women (Walby, 2011, p. 3). Typically, it involves the emancipation of women from the domestic sphere (especially domestic care work), gaining better access to education for young girls and women, supporting women to appear in the public sphere, including political representation, or equal treatment at work (e.g., the same salary as men). However, we have to add here that over the decades, the concept of feminism has acquired negative connotations of separatism, extremism, or avoiding men.

The second concept of gender identity is even more complex and problematic in various aspects. The main idea here is that gender identity is one's own internal sense of self and their gender, whether that is woman, man, both or neither of them. It must not be necessarily outwardly visible to others (Yarhouse & Sadusky, 2020). In other words, each individual can choose their gender irrespective of their biological sex at birth. We will have a closer look on how all these new notions have been affecting the language of media in the following chapters.

3 Gender and related terms

As already stated, the language we use is an image of our society, it reflects our reality, and at the same time, language also creates what we perceive as reality. Thus, the language also plays a fundamental role in the position of women and men in a society. It may reflect and support the unequal status of women and men, or contribute to equality and mutual respect. Gender stereotyping is another crucial element, which has a significant impact on the position of women and men in the society. There is an overlap between the language and the stereotypes, as the stereotypes are often spread by language in the media. Gender-related stereotypes are defined as "simplified images and generalized descriptions we attach to social aspects of femininity and masculinity" (Dubravská, 2010, p. 20). Concerning commercial communication and media in general, both play an important role in gender stereotyping. We will deal with this much more in detail in the practical part of this paper as "they are often blamed for not only reflecting gender stereotypes, but also for contributing to their creation and perpetuation" (Dubravská, 2010, p. 20). Concerning the area of research into gender stereotyping in commercial communications, it is necessary to mention authors, such as Valdřova, Koudelka, Furnham, Mark, Indřuchova, Ourahmoune, and Nyeck. They use techniques, such as language, content and semiotic analysis. Taking into account this topic, it is crucial to define two fundamental terms, as follows: Sexus (sex) and Genus (gender) as these terms are often mistakenly confused and considered to be synonyms. As sexus refers to biological sex, genus (gender) denotes social differences between men and women, which are not innate, but change over time and space within society and between societies. Sexus is defined as: "medically and legally classified category based on the assumption of primary and secondary biological signs increasing during adolescence. Based on sexus, people are currently divided into men, women and intersex people - that is, people, with characteristics of reproductive or sexual anatomy do not fit into the typical definition of man or woman" (Stefanaková, 2020, p. 18). Regarding linguistic point of view, these intersex people often want to be referred to with a gender-neutral pronoun – "it". In addition, gender is also a linguistic category for living and non-living beings- in contrast to exclusively biological property of animals - sexus. Grammar genus can sometimes match the natural sex, sometimes not.

Concerning other crucial terms, which have to be defined in the connection with meaningful discussion about gender issues, these are terms, as follows: feminist and gender linguistics, gender mainstreaming and gender studies. Feminists and gender studies are considered to be the new flows, which have naturally appeared as a reaction to gender situation these days. Under their influence, differences in the expression of women and men and gender language asymmetry began to emerge. This asymmetry is manifested by predominant use of masculine forms (generic masculine). The concerns about gender discrimination lead to request to change the language

standards. The scientific research studies, which overlap with this asymmetry, deal with the importance of gender in culture, society and science and their effort is to integrate the aspect of gender into various social areas. Today, there are several mutually incompatible theories and there are still some controversial discussions about the relationship between gender and sex and their significance for human identity. Gender mainstreaming is an important tool for promoting gender policy. It is a strategy, whose goal is to achieve equal status for men and women and introduce equal opportunities in all areas of politics, administration and organization, in an effort to strengthen social justice and democracy. It focuses on structures of institutions and organizations, which participate in reshaping gender inequality. Regarding the current legislative framework for the application of gender mainstreaming tools in European Union, the Action Plan II for Equal Rights is currently in force. It referred to specifically EU member countries, some EU directorates-general and European Commission Humanitarian Office, in the period of the years 2016-2020. The goals and measures for observing gender equality established in this Action plan are binding for international cooperation in the EU. There are some countries, such as Switzerland, which are not EU members, but systematically apply the program equalizing men and women in the sense of gender mainstreaming. Slovakia as the EU member, together with countries, such as Germany and Austria, follow and accept this plan, as well.

4 Linguistic point of view

Concerning linguistic perspective, there are some European languages, which take into account two genders in society. Romanesque languages pay attention to the natural gender in this case. If examining German and French languages, an active participle is genderless. As it comes to the Italian language, the masculine ending also applies to women. As regards the construction of endings according to gender, we can distinguish languages completely without reflection on gender, such as English and Hungarian, languages with a certain reflection of sex e.g., German, languages with greater gender reflection - mostly Romanesque languages and finally, languages that completely differentiate the naming of sexes - the Slavic languages in Europe, including the Slovak language. Various authors in the Czech Republic deal with this topic, but Valdřova is the main source of information. Other authors in the Czech Republic include Cmejřkova, Hoffmanova and Danes from the Czech Academy of Sciences. Gender inequality is also directly represented in the rules of the Slovak language:

- there are completely different words for a person with a different sex and certain function, e.g. “matka” (mother) – “otec” (father), “otcım/macocha” (stepfather/stepmother), “brat/sestra” (brother/sister) - there is not a gender distinction by ending;
- using of generic masculine is very common – for example the word in plural “študenti” (students) means both male and female students, however in terms of grammar, it is plural form of a masculine noun;
- the pronoun “they” that refers to several people has in Slovak two forms “ony” and “oni” – “ony” refers to a group of women, “oni” to men, as long as both men and women are involved “oni” is applied; using a female surname – according to law (which has exceptions), a woman's last name must always end in ending – “ova”, thus a man's surname is for instance “Kovac” and his wife's surname is “Kovacova” (Wirghova, 2008, p. 101). In this context, we have to mention two important facts. Recently, many young women in Slovakia refuse to add the ending “ova” to their husband's surname after getting married. There are several reasons for that, such as the surnames with “ova” are long and difficult if living abroad or travelling. In Slovak media, the ending “ova” is added to the surnames of foreign women, for example “May” in English and “Mayova” in Slovak. This has been perceived as slightly controversial, proponents say that adding “ova” make surnames of foreign women sound natural in Slovak, opponents believe that this should not be happening since their original name is without this ending.

Gender sensitive language is considered to be one of the most powerful tools to fight against gender stereotypes. Thus, it is believed that people should be careful with all their statements, especially if communication in public and to the public, including media messages. As already mentioned, the Slovak language distinguishes between masculine and feminine gender, and when addressing boys and girls and we use the so-called generic masculine (addresses in the masculine gender). If this happens, we may say that gender stereotypes are confirmed. Experts say that if we call the children “žiaci” (pupils), we confirm the invisibility of girls, that is, women in the classroom and thus also in the society. The authors Cmejřkova, Maggio, Thorn, Kramarė and Henley focus on this term and deal with it extensively on the theoretical basis. If we respect gender-sensitive language in Slovak, we should use gender-specific terms, such as “spisovateľ” (male writer) and “spisovateľka” (female writer), similarly “politik/politická” (male politician/female politician), or “prezident/prezidentka” (male president/female president).

Gender sensitivity in language is also expressed in other ways, for example regarding the housework (which is typically felt as tasks for women), it is important to emphasize that both men and women can take part in it (e.g., taking care of children, cleaning the house, etc.). In some EU countries (e.g., France, Germany), the generic

masculine has been revealed as a mechanism that puts women at a disadvantage, because its use evokes the image of a man. That was the reason to ban on advertising job offers formulated in generic masculine and some new directives concerning gender issues were implemented. There is “a Handle” in Canada concerning gender neutral profession marking dating to 1967. As it comes to Germany, there has been an obligation for advertising companies to indicate both gender variants since 1980. Austria accepted the law in 1985, according to which the gender variant must be indicated in the names of people and professions.

The language often uses established word combinations and phrases that are passed down from generation to generation. These may often seem very sexist, e.g. a woman is called “sexica, pipka, kus, sumna blondynka” to emphasize that she is sexually attractive, a man is called “samec, lovec, sex symbol, svalnaty podnikatel” to emphasize the masculinity. Gender-sensitive language seeks to exclude sexism from the active vocabulary. In case of the Slovak language, there is a clear asymmetry regarding the naming of people. We are often not sure how to name a person, e.g. the expression “zdravotná sestra” (nurse) in Slovak clearly refers to women only, or we are not used to use some female equivalents, e.g. “detektív, detektívka” (detective). We do not even know and it is hard to find some Slovak equivalents of words, such as “rytíř” (knight) – this word seems to be relating to men only, etc. Paradoxes subsequently often arise in practice. Despite the fact that in the Slovak language, there is masculine and feminine gender, women in the notary profession often use the term “notar” (notary) at the door of their office, despite the fact that feminine equivalent does exist (“notarka”). The same is true for business cards with professions, such as “lawyer, pharmacist, gynaecologist”, which very frequently contain masculine gender despite referring to women. Summing it up, all the above mentioned facts influence self-confidence of women and men, many trends are felt as at least problematic and although experts want people to use gender-sensitive language, it is in many instances felt as inappropriate or artificial. Generally speaking, there is a strong tendency for journalists, media people, politicians and others who often use language in public to adhere to the principles of the gender-sensitive language.

It has to be mentioned that due to the ideas of gender identity and especially the related efforts to include every minority into language used, while avoiding being offensive or insensitive, current English utilized in media seems to have new challenges to face. In recent times, we may come across rather unusual expressions in current media written in English, which subsequently cause a lot of attention and controversy. Due to the concept of gender identity, the idea of identifying according to one’s own feeling, there has started a serious debate if just feeling and identifying as someone makes you this new identity. In this perspective, there seems to be a struggle to define according to new principles who a woman is. Since transgender men or nonbinary individuals may be female in terms of their sex at birth, this has brought new problems not only into society, but also into language to be used in order to stay politically correct, or gender-inclusive. For example, The Washington Post used in its article the phrase “*pregnant people*” to include people born as women, but identifying in a different way, who may become pregnant, while not identifying themselves as women. In this context, there seems to be a lot of other highly problematic terms appearing, such as “*non-men, people with uteruses, people with a capacity for pregnancy, or birthing people*” to describe women, “*non-women*” for lesbians, or “*cis women*” for women whose gender identity correlates with female sex at birth. Naturally, these new words sparked immediate response in the form of debating, but also mocking and refusing to adhere to such language. It is questionable if such expressions are necessary to be invented and applied, and if they are not actually offensive towards women. Similarly, modern English tries to avoid using “*man/male*” in many nouns that involve these words and to use gender-neutral expressions. This may be perceived positively in instances, such as “*spokesman*”, and to use “*spokesperson*” in case the gender is not clear or may concern to any, or to use “*spokeswoman*” if the person is a woman. On the other hand, avoiding verbs, such as “*man up*” does not go in this direction, in our view.

5 Gender specifics in media (focus on advertising)

“Commercial communications and media in general play an important role in gender stereotyping. They are often blamed for not only reflecting gender stereotypes, but also for contributing to their creation and perpetuation” (Jirák & Kopplová, 2007; Renzetti & Curran, 2003). As it is well known, media serve not just to inform and educate, but also for fun, relaxation, and enjoyment. They also serve to advertise products or services. As some television series, various TV shows become source for advertising, product placement is used as a very strong tool to advertise. It goes hand in hand with the appearance of various new and for many strange beings. A heroine, who appears in modern TV series is not a common housewife from the village, who makes a living by idle work. She is mostly a doctor, lawyer, police woman, FBI agent, cosmonaut, fighter, etc. Regarding a man depicted in recent media, a new unusual character has appeared called *metrosexual*. They are obviously very interesting target groups for marketing communication experts. metrosexuals care excessively about their appearance, while spending money on expensive things, and not taking care of other men at all. We believe that metrosexuals adopt certain stereotypes of

female behaviour. We agree with Zdenek Krizek that the metrosexual as a new type of gender is worth to be discussed, as well as new gender called *singles*. It also leads to a question: How many new gender types have actually appeared in media, which are very interesting target groups for marketers? We also agree with the author that "gender is a way the human being manifests their position in society. Regarding sex, there are just two categories - man and woman, but as it comes to gender, there can be more" (Krizek, 2010, p. 12).

Concerning marketing point of view, perfumes, gels, shampoos, skin lotions, liposuction, lifting etc. are connected nearly exclusively with a target group of women, the metrosexual is considered an exception to this rule. From a historical point of view, it all started with matriarchy, in which women had the main role in the society. This period was much longer than the following period in which men took over the leadership role. A Neolithic period was typical of peace and co-operation between man and woman. Later on, women began to free themselves and there was confusion in gender roles. Men started to behave much softer, as a reaction to this situation. As it comes to depiction of current men – they for example shave their armpits, are interested in perfumes, they often look in the mirror. On the contrary, women often behave as men, e.g. they are aggressive and rude, use men just for sexual pleasure. There is nothing bad about emancipation, but the problem is that some women exaggerate it. The researchers in the area of gender stereotyping in commercial communications such as Valdrova, Koudelka, Furnham, Mark and Indruchova use various methods such as content or semiotic analysis. Erving Hoffman is considered to be a pioneer in the field of gender stereotypes in visuals concerning promotional communications. Oatesova also focused her research on gender, specifically gender relationships in advertising. Another interesting research in our conditions, which is worth to be mentioned in this connection is research made by Komarkova, Butorova and research made by advertising agency Leo Burnett Worldwide. There are various research studies abroad, which focus on gender issues, e.g. research in New Zealand made by Sue Abel. She focused on Vodafone advertisements and the issue of "Knowing Wink" read by young people in advertising in the late 1990s and 2000s.

Seeing the quantity and content of the existing studies and the focus of this paper, we will not deal with it in more detail. We just want to point out situation in this field at home and abroad, in general. Regarding advertising, presentation of women and men and their mutual relations was observed in the second half of 20th century by various researchers from different fields, e.g. sociologists, semiotics, linguists, media analysts. The marketers in the Czech Republic and Slovakia deal with this topic from different perspectives, for instance focus on stereotypes vs. archetypes in commercial communication, perception of male and female advertising communications from the viewpoint of communication strategy, gender emancipation in advertising communication, consumer attitudes towards the portrayal of men and women in advertising, icon of women in advertising, advertising appeals, etc. Curran and Renzetti (2003) collected and provided a clear summary of the findings of the previous research in the work *Women, men and society*. They came up to the following conclusions:

- in advertising, men appear more often than women;
- women are younger than men and more often married;
- women are depicted as dependent and depend on the help of men;
- women have less knowledge and skills in advertising than men, who act in the role of a professional and mentor;
- women appear less often as commentators in advertising ("voice-over"), so they do not act as an authority, do not provide any extra information and are just product users;
- women are most often placed in the domestic environment, while men are shown at work;
- if women were depicted at work, they were traditionally female occupations, e.g. flight attendants, nurses, assistants, teachers, did not appear in higher working positions;
- women's expressions have an emotional character, while men use rational procedures;
- women are almost always depicted in relation to someone, they do not appear as individuals;
- women seek approval of their behaviour from the family, partner, men from friends or work colleagues (Butorova, 2016, p. 96).

Gender-related issue in the current media is a highly interesting and complex topic, widely discussed recently. It is worth to be debated and elaborated more from theoretical, as well as practical viewpoint, but due to the content and quantity of materials, which deal with this topic, complexity of the issue, it is impossible to cover all of its aspects in one paper. Thus, we tried to point out several aspects of this topics to stir follow-up research and debate.

Conclusion

The media is literally everywhere around us, and due to modern technologies, its messages are easily available to media consumers. Language used in media is in our times the form of language expression we are most usually exposed to. It reflects our reality, while also bringing along new trends, changes, alternations perceived in the postmodern society. Linguists who deal with media texts have realized that it is not sufficient anymore to limit their

examination to linguistic means applied to form a communication unit with the resulting feedback, it is vital to take into account other important factors, including unprecedented progress in new technologies, changes in the way media operate and other factors that contribute to constructing contemporary media messages and choosing suitable vocabulary. One of the most important aspects that has an immense influence on media language is the phenomenon of political correctness, which has been affecting media for decades, and can be seen in various areas, including the endeavour to avoid sexism. Although originally, it was meant to improve the language through avoiding offending previously discriminated groups of people (in case of sexist language women and individuals with different sexual preferences), in our times it seems to have taken rather strange directions, especially in modern English. Slovak and English are different languages and struggle with the effort to implement gender-sensitive and gender-inclusive language in different ways. While in this respect, the main issue in current Slovak, including Slovak used in media, seems to be the struggle to avoid generic masculine nouns, in modern English we may find a lot of extremely unusual neologisms. Despite the fact that we believe that in majority of cases these changes are driven by the effort to build gender equality, and to avoid sexist language, they are not always perceived positively by language users. In many instances it seems so that instead of bringing people together in mutual respect and understanding, in the never-ending endeavour to include every possible minority into any context, it leads to only deeper division of already deeply divided society.

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