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Framing of the gender-sensitive language debate in Lithuanian online newspaper articles: a constructivist perspective

Gender-sensitive language has already emerged as a subject of discussion in the public sphere in the past years in Lithuania. A new round of heated debates sparked last autumn, when Vilnius University (hereinafter VU), the oldest and largest Lithuanian higher education institution, released the *Guidelines of Gender-sensitive Language* (hereinafter *Guidelines*, 2021), which were produced by a group of VU administrative and academic staff members. Even though the Guidelines were advisory, given their implications, their discussion took over to the public domain and raised heated discussions in the media. Among those who opposed the Guidelines were Chief of the State Language Inspectorate and also member of VU academic staff (Valotka 2021), intellectuals, and politicians. Thirty-nine members of the Lithuanian Parliament signed a joint letter of address to Vilnius University Senate, to express their objections (Lietuvos Respublikos Seimo nariai 2021). Emotionally-charged opinions were not infrequent in public comments, when those were available, following relevant articles in online news portals.

The present study explores the framing of the *gender-sensitive language* (Lith. “lyčiai jautri kalba”) debate in Lithuanian online newspapers, published following the release of the Guidelines in October 2011 through March 2022, i.e., shortly after Lithuania Independence Restoration Day. We seek to answer the following two questions:

1. What are the constituting frames of the notion *gender-sensitive language* and the proposed new coinage, *žmoga*, in Lithuanian?
2. How is the gender-sensitive language debate framed in Lithuanian online newspapers?

The research questions rely on the notion of the *frame*, a concept employed both in social and language studies, albeit supplied with somewhat different foci. In social research, one of the definitions perceives the frame as “a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them” (Gamson and Modigliani 1987: 143). In linguistics, the frame is “a system of categories structured in accordance with some motivating context” (Fillmore 1982: 119), and the very idea of structured categories has been approached through a variety of ways (see, e.g., Cap 2013, Musolff 2006, Stefanowitsch 2010). Both the sociological and the linguistic approaches to the frame comply with the “selection and salience” principle, whereby a given phenomenon is made “more salient in a communicating text” through targeted use of language strategies, thereby stipulating “a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman 1993: 52). That frames may be of different scope and, whether literal or non-literal in the meaning conveyed, may stand in a hierarchical relationship to each other, has also been noted (Lim and Seo 2009, Stefanowitsch 2010).

To answer our research questions, we adopt a hybrid methodological framework, combining linguistic analysis *per se*, elements of ethnolinguistics (Bartmiński 2020, Głaz 2021, Gudavičius 2009, Rutkovska et. al. 2017; cf. Musolff 2015), and the four-level approach of Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), in which the phenomenon – through identifying, analyzing, and interpreting data—is examined at the textual, intertextual, extratextual, and the broader sociopolitical levels (Wodak 2011, Fairclough & Wodak 1997; cf. Fairclough 1995, 1996, 2003). The components of the CDS framework are perceived

here as at least partly overlapping with the premises of the framing analysis after Gamson and Modigliani (1989), e.g., in the identification of *stakeholders* and *sponsors*.

At the textual level, we first consider the tokens *gender-sensitive*, *žmogus*, and *žmoga* from the linguistic, semantic and cultural perspectives. In considering the formal linguistic properties, we seek to show that the selection of the token to address gender-sensitivity is not unproblematic for a number of reasons, the most immediate one being the fact that in Lithuanian, the grammatical category of gender is based on the opposition masculine-feminine for lexical nouns, with the masculine as the unmarked gender, and has the neuter option only for the class of adjectives and certain pronouns (Adamson & Šereikaitė 2019 and references there). We also consider aspects of word formation, semantic meaning and cultural linguistic heritage. We then conduct a framing analysis of the coverage of the gender-sensitive language debate in online newspaper articles in the specified period. In particular, we focus on lexical and syntactic strategies, the former manifested through nomination strategies, catchphrases, deixis, and evaluative vocabulary, and the latter through predication, modal and emphatic constructions and passivisation (Chilton 2004, Entman 1993, Gamson and Modigliani 1989, van Dijk 1998, Kopytowska & Krakowiak 2020). Albeit briefly, we also consider public comments, when those are available, following the relevant articles.

At the intertextual-interdiscursive level, our analysis considers selected thematically related online articles from the period starting 2008, the year of the first attested written use of the token *žmoga*. We also attempt to place the sensitive-language debate within a broader context of issues topical for the contemporary Lithuanian ethos.

At the extralinguistic level, we identify direct and indirect participants involved in the discourse (Gamson & Modigliani 1989) (e.g., *Jtrauktis ir oficialiuose* 2021, *Lyčių požiūriu* 2018), consider the accompanying indexical signs and the figurative meaning conveyed by them (Benczes 2019, Fiske 2011, Forceville 2016), and, where available, reflect upon the public's response as expressed through explicit behavioural evaluation along the deontic axiological scale (Chilton 2004, Cap 2013, Korostenskienė 2020).

Finally, at the broader sociopolitical level, we take a philosophical stance at the phenomenon of gender-sensitive language (Bolter 2016, Brinkman 2017, Hansen 2005, Hassan 1977, Lollini 2008, Lyotard 1984), in which the debate under analysis is viewed as marking, metaphorically speaking, the meeting place of two tectonic plates, i.e., the humanist and the post-modernist, or rather, post-humanist, philosophical frameworks (Korostenskienė 2021).

The findings of the developed framing analysis across these four levels serve as *interpretive packages* which help a) to explore the framing strategies conducive to foregrounding the relevant agenda in the social consciousness (cf. Cap 2008, 2013, Kopytowska & Krakowiak 2020, Lewandowska-Tomasczyk & Pęzyk 2021); and b) to unveil the mechanisms underlying the representation of social phenomena, which ultimately lead to the construction of reality (Gamson & Lasch 1983, Gamson et al. 1992, Nagel 1994, Lewandowska-Tomasczyk & Pęzyk 2021, Berger & Luckmann 1967).

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