

Claudia Posch

Feminist language forms in German

A corpus-assisted study of personal appellation
with non-human referents



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1 Introduction

The objective of this book is, first of all, to critically evaluate different approaches towards feminist linguistics, especially those that theoretically deal with the strategies of gender symmetric language. This theoretical debate takes place between the poles of diachronic and synchronic linguistic theory, which have been treated as strictly divided approaches since Saussure et al.. Paradoxically, on the one hand, diachrony and synchrony are two independent directions in linguistics, on the other there is the problem that there is no clear line along which they can be divided. Thus, it is discussed if one still can speak of such a strong division of both in the field of feminist linguistics. Furthermore, if such a distinction does not really exist how does this affect the division between language system and language usage (*langue* vs. *parole*), a basic dualism which is basically assumed within feminist linguistics. Therefore, this dissertation discusses two basic problems: Which problems arise for feminist linguistic theory if it assumes a strict division between the language system and language usage (*langue* vs. *parole*)? Is the differentiation between language system and language usage not analogous to other binary oppositions and which consequences does the assumption of underlying oppositional pairs have for the discussion (for example scientific vs. non-scientific, culture vs. nature, etc.). This includes an assumption raised by Hornscheidt (2006, 2003, 1998 and 04.06.2007), who suggests that linguistics has overlooked the importance of the so-called *Diskurswende* ('linguistic turn') that captured the humanities in the 1990s. Or as Günther and Linke (2006) put it:

"Linguistics up to now remarkably has not commented on the paradigmatic aspect and the effective history of the 'linguistic turn', at least not in the form of programmatic contributions. Has linguistics even missed out on it? This indeed has to be admitted." (Günther and Linke, 2006, p. 4)

With this Hornscheidt (2006) suggests that linguistics is still a very structuralist field as opposed to other fields in the humanities, which no longer

work with a differentiation between discourse and the actual ‘things’ it describes.

1.1 State of research

Feminist linguistics in the German language area is still deprived of recognition as part of the field of linguistics and is often framed as something *other*, something non-linguistic. It is thus the aim of this study to evaluate the standing of feminist linguistics within the field of linguistics on the one hand and to again raise the discussion on language usage which is claimed by feminist linguistics. The frequent usage of the so-called generic masculine in German is questioned and discussed. Furthermore, the debates on the semantic rooting of *sexus* in grammatical gender in German are critically evaluated. The scientific argument on gender symmetric language usage is a starting point. The topic is still very controversial, not only in the public sphere but also in university discourse. Linguistics, especially feminist linguistics, treats it as part of so-called language system critique (as opposed to language usage critique). Feminist linguistics investigate the possibilities of gender symmetric language within the grammar of a language with a focus on personal appellation. This focus resulted in proposals for gender symmetric language usage which have now been partly implemented in public discourse – in public institutions it is mandatory to ‘gender’ texts. However, feminists locate a certain backlash in the usage of gender symmetric language strategies and in the public sphere those strategies are still very disliked. The linguistic debate as well stagnates and takes place between the pure formalists and their critics. The former appeal to the regularities and systematics of language from the basis of its naturalness. According to them language(s) function a certain way and this must not be changed through artificial influences from outside. They usually suspect that those who criticize this view confuse grammatical gender with biological sex. A true, serious linguist and grammarian therefore should view grammatical gender as a formal category (even if some undefined semantic ‘residue’ is generally accepted). On the other hand, feminist linguists, never questioned the idea of the language system versus language usage but rather it assumes that by ways of political correct language usage the underlying system will gradually be changed. Its main focus was and is the usage of personal appellation.

In this book a recent, post-structuralist theory (constructivist) is used as a framework. Particularly the research of Lann Hornscheidt provides starting point, which was presented in the book *Die sprachliche Benennung von Personen aus konstruktivistischer Sicht* (2006). Hornscheidt defines grammar as a form of language usage which is more or less conventionalized. Grammatical gender is a category of knowledge in which information also is more or less conventionalized. Hornscheidt's approach is based on Marmaridou's (2000) definition of 'conventionalized' meaning, which is that contextual meaning is 'lost' and 'schematized' by ongoing repetition. Even the elusive category of grammatical gender has a certain semantic content (or as said before 'residue') which is not even denied by traditional linguistics. It is rather unclear, if or to what extent this information influences the so-called language system. By using a constructivist frame the debate on feminist linguistics can be viewed from a new perspective. It is possible to ask how far the semantic content of grammatical gender (especially the content 'sex') is schematized.

1.2 General outline

In the second chapter of this dissertation a new perspective on grammar will be presented as a framework. This framework is based on the work of Lann Hornscheidt and thus it is constructivist approach to grammar. Hornscheidt criticizes that form a constructivist point of view

“[...] many problems which are discussed in the linguistic and philosophical literature become irrelevant as they take extra-linguistic realities as a starting point for evaluating if a reference is specific or not, if aims at existing or non-existing objects” (Hornscheidt, 2006, p. 100).

The main points of a constructivist view on language are the following: This new approach does no longer assume any kind of extra-linguistic reality and thus also abandons the idea of language as reflection of reality. Hence, the strict distinction between a preliminary language system and language usage is abandoned. Hornscheidt assumes that certain types of language usages are strongly conventionalized and repeated so many times that they become the status of a system and appear natural. Hornscheidt particularly emphasizes the relevance of language as a medium that constitutes our reality. It is essential that meaning as well

as grammatical functions are procedural. They are subject to continuous negotiation in very particular situations of speaking. Thus, the focus here shifts from grammar to language usage. In the first chapter of this dissertation this new view is laid out in more detail. It will be used as a framework to gain a new perspective on research in the field of feminist linguistics in the following chapters.

Chapter three provides an overview of the field of feminist linguistics with a strong focus on German feminist linguistics. A critical new perspective on the literature based on the previously laid out framework is given by re-evaluating authors like Trömel-Plötz (1997), Pusch (1997), Kalverkämper (1997) and Kalverkämper (1997b). Important questions here are: How does feminist linguistics look today? Does it still exist? What are the problems this field of research faces and is it still a necessity? Also more recent psycholinguistic (or neurolinguistic) studies on the subject are integrated in this chapter.

In chapter four, grammar-theoretical discussions on gender are re-evaluated critically. The time-frame was chosen to represent earliest works up to the beginnings the previous century. Important research questions in this chapter will be: How did early grammarians view grammatical gender? How is the early debate on the semantic content of grammatical gender depicted and how did it influence the work of early feminist linguists.

In chapter five more recent grammar-theoretical approaches will be evaluated. These includes diachronic approaches to the discussion on grammatical gender. The critical evaluation with the above framework shows that feminist language critique is now part of different fields of study, even if grammar theorists often do not recognize the work of feminist linguistics.

An empirical study forms the second part of this thesis. Metaphors (more exactly personifications) are analyzed according to their degree of conventionalization. The idea is that metaphors especially hint at more or less schematized language structures. The study asks if the semantic content of grammatical gender is transferred onto things or items and if so, if traditional gender dichotomy is reproduced and constructed in this way. It is expected that there is a tendency to personify unanimated entities, as for example institutions, by using grammatical gender as an indicator for the perceived gender of the target metaphor. Furthermore, the study is intended to raise the issue if the continuous repetition of the ‘gendering’ of objects, concepts and abstracta with the help of the

linguistic tool grammatical gender is contributing to the reinforcement of ‘male bias’. Chapter 6, thus presents the methodology used in this study. Combined methods from computer and corpus-linguistics were implemented in order to create useful data. The major research tool was COSMAS II, a linguistically annotated POS-tagged, corpus application with which the German reference corpus (3,6 Billion words) can be searched.

In chapter seven, the resulting database is presented. A few examples from the data contained in this database illustrate its possible uses and preliminary interpretation of this data is provided. Particularly, uses of the German suffix ‘-in’ with inanimate referents are shown. A comparable study was conducted by Jobin in 2004. Nomina referring to institutions were checked according to their nominal predicates and if those were using the feminine gender in accordance with the gender of the noun.

2 Theoretical framework

In this chapter a post-structural approach to language and grammar is developed, which forms the basis of this study. First, the idea of a preliminary language system is investigated. The usage of the terms grammatical gender and (biological) gender in this study is established. Then, the concept of ‘embodiment’ in thinking (and language) is explicated. Subsequently, an overview on conceptual metaphor theory and its relation to the notion of embodiment is given. Furthermore, the relation of such a constructivist viewpoint to the theory of *Linguistic Relativity* is discussed. In concordance with a constructivist approach, the notions of ‘conventionalization’ and ‘appellation’ are presented.

2.1 Post-structuralist approaches to language and grammar

This study incorporates a somewhat different view of grammar and, more precisely, the category grammatical gender based on the substantial work *Die sprachliche Benennung von Personen aus konstruktivistischer Sicht* by Lann Hornscheidt (2006); Hornscheidt (1998), and the pragmatic approach of Sophia Marmaridou (2000); Marmaridou (2005); Marmaridou (2005b). The most central concept in Hornscheidt’s work is that grammar, in a constructivist sense, is not a category that is strictly separable from language usage but rather a “highly conventionalized form of language usage” (Hornscheidt, 2006, p.37). Feminist language criticism has been divided into two branches so far: the criticism of the language system and criticism of language usage. For the German language, system-critique has centered on the so-called generic masculine or else the default gender (cf. chapter 3). The theoretical framework in this study is applied to feminist language criticism and grammar theory approaches by embodying a constructivist perspective which no longer supports the strict differentiation between the language system and language usage in order to show that the very ideological debate pursued so far is based on this strict division or, more particular, on the idea that such a division is necessary. The main idea of a post-structural approach is that grammar

and gender in particular cannot be understood without regard to language use. Grammar, in particular gender, not only entails some kind of meaning but is a grammatical tool that triggers and produces meanings.

This is one of the key assumptions of the recently developing field of cognitive linguistics, too. If this key assumption is considered appropriate, “then strategic language change appears in a new light” (Hornscheidt, 2006, p. 39). It can no longer be assumed that anyone is able to view the concept of grammar objectively and separated from the *parole*. Furthermore, all descriptions of grammar are themselves language uses and thus actively contribute to the reinforcement of certain linguistic practices. Structural linguistics, also its feminist branch, has been viewing language as mirroring reality, especially when it comes to the topic of language and gender. This, first of all, presupposes that there is such a thing as extra-linguistic reality which is disconnected from language and precedes language (and thus grammatical gender). Secondly, it also presupposes that there are precisely two genders in the world, man and woman, and nothing else. According to Hornscheidt the first point entails the idea that one systematically can change language. Hence, it is suggested by Hornscheidt to shift focus from the language system to language use and to view use as being at the core of language. It is further insisted on the relevance of language as an instrument to construct our realities. Those media which use and convey language, according to Hornscheidt, play an important role as they often have normative effects. Consequently, it is not inherently language that is discriminating but it is how speakers are used to speak. But also what we call the *language system* partially defines and normalizes and legitimizes how we are used to speak.

The investigation of language hence is shifted towards a pragmatic direction. Also Marmaridou aims at a “re-definition of pragmatic study” in a constructivist sense. This means that pragmatic meaning is no longer viewed as being independently existing but rather as a part of thought or, as she puts it, as ‘internalized’ (Marmaridou, 2000, p. 13). Marmaridou provides an overview of three major developments of pragmatics, starting with the “tradition of the philosophers of language” such as John Austin and John Searle. According to Marmaridou, later approaches then either focused on the hearer or on the speaker and developed two-way models of communication. Their main interest was to find out how people could come to some sort of understanding of each other’s utterances when language itself was not unambiguous. There is a strong focus on “context”

in these kind of approaches as well. More recent views are based on a different view of language. One, the so-called *cognitivist framework* sees language as being a product of mental activity. The other, the societal approach, “regards it as a social construct” (Marmaridou, 2000, p. 14). It is Marmaridou’s aim to bring these two seemingly non-compatible views together because mainstream approaches to pragmatics do “[...]not account for language as both a biological and a social phenomenon” (Marmaridou, 2000, p. 42).

Marmaridou (2000) similarly explains the objectivist paradigm as such that it assumes that language mirrors an external reality. In semantics this paradigm operates from the basis that expressions “get their meaning only via their capacity to correspond, or failure to correspond, to the *real world*” (Marmaridou, 2000, p. 44). Words, phrases and expressions are therefore theoretically able to correctly express an item or content and they can be true or false. This objective approach does not link human cognition and *existence* in any way or even sees them as being related. Rather they suggest that “[e]xistence cannot depend in any way on human cognition” (Marmaridou, 2000, p. 44). Thus, there is a certain way in which the world actually *is*, independently of how people think, interpret, believe or perceive the world.

Objectivist viewpoints of word meaning need to presuppose two types of knowledge: *definitional knowledge* and *encyclopedic knowledge*. This means, it is presumed that language users know which features constitute an entity on the one hand and on the other that the users know about features that can be optional in an entity. In this way, objectivist semantics can distinguish between what is in the language (*definitional knowledge*) and what is not (*encyclopedic knowledge*). Marmaridou criticizes this approach because it “manages to exclude social aspects from the definitional meaning of words” (Marmaridou, 2000, p. 45). Such aspects are then interpreted as being beyond the power of language because they are part of the existing world. This is also the reason why abstract concepts such as emotions etc. cannot be systematized very well with this approach because it is not possible to define their properties “objectively and externally to human beings” (Marmaridou, 2000, p. 46) that is detached from the human body and experience.

2.2 *Hen or egg? Is language structure preceding language use?*

The above is also entailed in the discussion on whether or not there actually is *meaning* in the grammatical category gender. Hornscheidt (2006) suggests to present a new model of analyzing reference. The term *reference* (in accordance with the constructivist viewpoint) is called *personal appellation*. Studies so far were focussing on portraying the relationship between grammatical gender and (human) gender. Especially, studies of German still focus on separating *genus* from *sexus* without taking into account that the notion of *sexus* has fundamentally changed: i.e. replaced by Butler's¹ notion of gender. Gender is a constructivist view of a social category and the constructivist viewpoint doubts that linguistic structures are preceding language use. This view of language has severe consequences for what *meaning* and *grammar* signify and which status is attributed to grammar and grammatical gender respectively. *Meaning* thus is dependent on conceptualization and it is viewed as something dynamic and situational – it is not just there. A very simplified summarization of this view could be:

Meaning does not exist until you mean something.

What Hornscheidt (2006) aims at with this is to express the “perspective of action” (Hornscheidt, 2006, p. 616) of language i.e. speech as an action. In terms of research she suggests a change of terminology that goes from static concepts to a more dynamic, process-oriented terminology. An example for this would be to use term ‘pejorizing’ instead of ‘pejorative’.² The use of a progressive form is intended to make it easier to grasp the term as a dynamic concept.

Furthermore, some forms of language use are viewed as strongly standardized or normalized. Because they are functioning in such a way, they obtain the status of a system:

“In the model developed here it is suggested to conceptualize language fundamentally as language usage and to critically analyze assumptions of a pre-discursive, linguistic antecedence, to critically ask what is naturalized by this act

¹cf. Butler 2004

²“pejorisierend statt pejorativ” (Hornscheidt, 2006, p. 616)

and what is evading critical analysis of language use, which always looks at aspects of power and authority, for example power of interpretation” (Hornscheidt, 2006, p. 616).

If we assume that the category grammatical gender at least includes some semantic residue, then it cannot be studied by grammar theory alone. Thus, it cannot be treated as a ‘purely grammatical’ category for two reasons: first, the semantic residue needs to be taken into account when dealing with grammatical gender; secondly, if grammar itself is no longer seen as preceding language use, it follows that it is cannot be viewed as entirely separated from meaning.³ But if language is grounded in cognition, “then cognitive structure and conceptualizations of social reality must characterize language use, which thus contributes to the production, maintenance or change of social meaning” (Marmaridou, 2000, p. 2).

According to Marmaridou (2000), thus, social meaning is directly related to structures of thinking instead of being a mental image of something that exists in an external reality. The metaphor of knowledge as being engraved in the brain, as something that determines how we act and what we say has become obsolete. Rather our gray matter is flexible and changeable and so social meaning is not something that is constant but rather *processual*. Both, Marmaridou and Hornscheidt, put findings from “philosophical, cognitive and societal approaches to pragmatic meaning within an alternative theoretical framework, that of cognitive linguistics and experiential realism” (Marmaridou, 2000, p. 3). An important point in these approaches is that they conceive of language as being motivated by cognitive structure as well as interacting with it. Because of the direct interaction between brain structure and language the language users are acting as *social agents* and are thereby maintaining, reproducing, challenging or changing seemingly external parameters like power relations between interlocutors, institutional roles and relevant social values and cultural beliefs” (Marmaridou, 2000, pp. 3–4).

What is interesting, and does not go very well with the described the constructivist view are the terms *cognitive structure* and *brain structure*

³cf. Coseriu (1988): language is a dynamic process, the ‘system’ is produced, reproduced and modified continuously; it gains a certain stability by reproducing it very often; cf. Kienpointner (2000): the sexist tendency in vocabulary and grammar is not a problem of the language system but of language norms (Kienpointner, 2000, p. 228).

do not suggest synaptic plasticity and *processuality*. Of course, brain plasticity has to be taken into account when regarding the interaction between language users and brain structure. This means that the interaction is not only influencing the way we speak but also our experience with language could theoretically change the way our brain is formed.

“One of the key principles of behavioral neuroscience is that experience can modify brain structure long after brain development is complete. Indeed, it is generally assumed that structural changes in the brain accompany memory storage” (Kolb and Whishaw, 1998, pp. 44ff., and references therein).

This *processuality* of the brain itself also goes hand in hand with the representation of ‘reality’ in the brain. Such a view could in general be described as an *internalist* view of language in opposition to the structuralist view, which always distinguishes between language and external reality. One key concepts in such *internalist* approaches is that language and meaning are ‘embodied’.

2.3 Embodiment of thinking

Clark (1998) accurately describes models that separate between an internal and external (or real) world as *isolationalist* views of the mind. This means that the mind functions by sending-receiving input or as he puts it: “The world is (just) a source of inputs and an arena of outputs. And the body is just an organ for receiving inputs and effecting outputs (actions)” (Clark, 1998, p. 2). Also most approaches to grammar and grammatical gender can be classified as *isolationalist*, as they distinguish between the linguistic and the extra-linguistic, between language and the real world. In such approaches the mind is viewed as an entity by itself that is independent of the body by which it is carried.

But what exactly is meant by the term *embodiment* in *internalist* approaches? In cognitive science, as Ziemke (2001) puts it: “Embodiment is nowadays by many researchers considered a *conditio sine qua non* for any form of natural or artificial intelligence” (Ziemke, 2001, p. 1). According to Wilson (2002), what has become known today as embodied cognition has its starting point in earlier theories that assumed that there is no thinking without vision. Embodied cognition assumes “that the mind must be understood in the context of its relationship to a physical body that interacts with the world” (Wilson, 2002, p. 625).