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Communicating gender in Slovak and Czech: evaluations based on behavior and life style

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Abstract

This study explores exceptions to symmetrical linguistic encoding of maleness and femaleness in the semantic category *Evaluations based on one's behavior and life style*. In particular, the mapping of lexical gaps onto the system of nominal lexicon is discussed. The analysis focuses on Slovak data obtained from *Krátky slovník slovenského jazyka* (*Concise Dictionary of the Slovak Language*) and - when applicable – contrasts them against Dickins's findings on Czech animate nouns. While ideological ramifications of the interrelation between grammatical gender, linguistic androcentrism, and societal sexist assumptions are not the primary goal of this article, they are considered and discussed when relevant.

Keywords: Gender symmetry; gender asymmetry; lexical gaps; parallel designations, with a semantic difference; behavior; Slovak; Czech

1. Introduction

There seems to be a cross-cultural social agreement on perceiving men through the prism of authority and strength, and women through the optics of the aesthetic. Male bias has existed in evaluating women (and sometimes children), especially with respect to their appearance and behavior. Such bias is palpable in the following Slovak (henceforth Sk) and Czech (henceforth Cz) negative evaluations: *poběhlice* (Cz) 'wanton', *koketa* (Sk) 'coquette, flirt', *rafika* (Sk) 'deceitful, mendacious woman', *macecha* (Cz) 'malicious, cruel woman, lit. stepmother', *ťapa* (Sk), *káča* (Cz) 'dumb woman, silly goose, judy'. Notice that all aforementioned lexemes are assigned feminine

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grammatical gender. Characteristically, no male/masculine counterparts exist in Slovak for the examples above. Moreover, men's negative behavior seems to judged more mercifully by society than women's; for instance, the sexually loose behavior of men might even carry connotations of achievement. Naturally, in the course of time, some stereotypical assumptions about the appropriateness or inappropriateness of certain social roles for men and women can change, a fact that tends to be reflected linguistically in both contemporary Slovak and contemporary Czech.

The problem of linguistic encoding of maleness and femaleness at large has been receiving growing attention. In some cases, research attempts to demonstrate the inherent inequalities in the linguistic treatment of women and men (e.g., Holmes and Meyerhoff, 2005; Holmes, 2006; Pauwels, 1998; Romaine, 1998). Many works in contemporary gender linguistics argue that the linguistic feature that contributes to 'androcentrism', 'reinforcement of male dominance and social prestige', 'the unequal status of men and women', 'the marginalization of women', 'invisibility of women' should be eradicated.

This study does not primarily attempt to evaluate ideological ramifications of the interrelation between grammatical gender, linguistic androcentrism, and societal sexist assumptions. Instead, the main objective is to explore one particular way in which gender asymmetry gets mapped onto the system of nominal lexicon related to one's behavior and life style in Slovak, and compare collected data with Dickins's (2001) Czech examples.

2. Data and methodology

The lemmas[1] under investigation belong to the semantic category *Evaluations based on behavior*. They denote individuals in terms of social behavior, and, marginally, life style. *Evaluations based on behavior* is one of sixteen semantic categories established and examined within a more complex gender-related research project conducted by the author (see Michálková, 2010, 2014a, 2014b).

The Slovak data corpus for the research is chiefly drawn from *Krátky slovník slovenského jazyka [Concise Dictionary of the Slovak Language]*, hereafter CDSL (Kačala, Pisárčiková, and Považaj, 2003). Despite being a "concise dictionary, CDSL includes over 60,000 entries, including 6,133 personal nouns identified to form the material of our corpus. CDSL is a prescriptive monolingual dictionary of the codified standard language published by the recognized authoritative arbiter of language questions, the Ľudovít Štúr Institute of Linguistics of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. This dictionary has acquired importance as a prestigious and normative book among the general population. The strictly delimited but ample number of items collected from CDSL (Kačala, Pisárčiková, and Považaj, 2003) is sufficient to establish an accurate picture of the gender differentiation in Modern Slovak and to confirm the validity of our conclusions. The Slovak nouns that constitute the core of this study all denote human beings. Out of 6,133 lexical items in CDSL (Kačala, Pisárčiková, and Považaj, 2003) identified as personal nouns, 943 lexemes refer to one's behavior (15.38%). The semantic category *Evaluations based on behavior* which is the subject of this study has the third strongest representation in our corpus. It is proceeded by *Identity as defined by vocation and avocation* (1,754 lexemes related to the area of employment and leisure-time activities (28.6%)) and *Descriptions denoting agents of specific actions or activities* (987 lemmas expressing agents of specific activities (16.09%)).

Czech data come from Dickins's (2001) three informants (two women and one man), cross-checked with the non-corpus based eight-volume *Slovník spisovného jazyka českého [Dictionary of the Standard Czech Language]* (1989), henceforth DSCL (Havránek et al., 1989) and three largest written-corpora based Czech frequency lists.

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[1] Even though the terms *word, lexeme, lemma, dictionary entry*, and *noun* are used more or less interchangeably in this study, the units predominantly examined are to be understood in the strict sense as *lexemes*, i.e., items in the lexicon, represented as dictionary entries. Crystal (1996:199) [7] defines a lexeme as an abstract, minimal distinctive unit in the semantic system of a language, as opposed to the term word, which refers to the phonological, grammatical and lexical levels. Lexemes are characterized by Cruse (1986: 80) [8] as families of lexical units, where "a lexical unit is the union of a single sense with a lexical form; a lexical form is an abstraction from a set of word forms (or alternatively – it is a family of word forms) which differ only in respect of inflections." Lexemes are the units which are typically alphabetically listed in dictionaries as separate entries under their citation-forms. In CDSL, the nominative singular of nouns and adjectives is used to represent all the inflected forms of the lexeme.