

## REVIEW

Karwatowska, Małgorzata and Jolanta Szpyra-Kozłowska. 2005. *Lingwistyka płci: Ona i on w języku polskim*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej. 294 pages. ISBN: 83-227-2342-3.

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*Lingwistyka płci: Ona i on w języku polskim* by Małgorzata Karwatowska and Jolanta Szpyra-Kozłowska is conceived as a resource encompassing the most important issues which concern the largely under-theorised and under-investigated problem of linguistic sexism in Polish. Linguistic sexism is generally understood as various forms of discrimination levelled against men or women by means of language use (forms of address, the use of or excessive reliance on generic masculine forms, the use of words and phrases that carry sexist connotations etc.). Sexism exercised by means of language is believed by many sociolinguists to lead to an unfair and distorted representation of females and males and, often as a consequence, to different forms of gender exclusion in culture and society. In their book, Małgorzata Karwatowska and Jolanta Szpyra-Kozłowska address the most important aspects of this complex phenomenon in the context of the dominant patterns of language use and perception in Poland.

In Chapter 1, the authors introduce the notion of linguistic sexism and briefly discuss the way it manifests itself in languages other than Polish (e.g. English, French, Italian, Japanese, Czech). Specific differences between the languages notwithstanding, they observe that it is prevalently women who are affected by various forms of linguistic bias. Next, the reader is abundantly provided with the examples of lexical subtleties found in Polish which indicate that also this language may be (and regularly is) a powerful vehicle of sex discrimination. Still, even though gender asymmetries in Polish cannot be denied, it should also be noticed that the authors' discussion of the problem seems at times excessively subjective. For example, Karwatowska and Szpyra-Kozłowska suggest that there are no positively evaluated phrases with the word *baba* (E. *woman*), as opposed to *chłop* (E. *man*) (p. 43). They, however, make no mention of the diminutive forms of *baba* (*babka*, *babeczka*) which are used in a positive sense (cf. *równa babka*, *fajna babeczka*). Similarly, it is debatable whether grammatically feminine phrases such as *koleżanka po fachu* (E. *professional colleague* f.) and *koleżanka po piórze* (E. *fellow writer* f.) are not plausible, as opposed to their masculine forms, i.e. *kolega po fachu* (E. *professional colleague* m.) and *kolega po piórze* (E. *fellow writer* m.). In their claims, the authors rely mainly on data from dictionaries of the Polish language; it might be expected that a closer scrutiny of authentic language usage and of language corpora would bring about different conclusions. Indeed, the dictionaries of

Polish do not include expressions such as *koleżanka po fachu* and *koleżanka po piórze*. Nevertheless, these phrases do appear in the everyday speech of Poles and are not necessarily considered ill-formed or clumsy. Also, the links between some language aspects presented in the chapter and their social and cultural background are not expounded upon in sufficient detail. For instance, discussing the negative connotations of compound phrases with the word *macocha* (E. *stepmother*), the authors fail to mention that it is neither the language itself nor sexist attitudes expressed by language users to which these pejorative connotations should be ascribed, but rather the fact that it is in fairy tales that stepmothers are usually constructed as negative characters.

In Chapter 2 the authors focus on selected aspects of linguistic sexism in Polish. First, they analyse the meaning and usage of the word *człowiek* (E. *human being*). The authors claim that, despite the prevalent assumptions of the genericness of the word, it is to a far larger extent perceived as connoting the masculine gender than the feminine (p. 70). Thus, the authors propose after Jaworski (1986) that it is the word *osoba* (E. *person*) that should be used in the generic contexts for it has more gender-balanced connotations (p. 68). Next, the authors highlight some glaring gender asymmetries and stereotypes in the expressions referring to virginity, promiscuity, sexual intercourse, marital status, faithfulness and adultery (pp. 75–86). More precisely, both the lexicographic and survey data illustrate how women are objectified in expressions denoting getting married or having sex, indicate the overlexicalization of the concept of women's promiscuity, as well as show some interesting semantic asymmetries in reference to this very concept.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, with respect to phrases describing physical appearance, Karwowska and Szypra-Kozłowska observe that there are notably more expressions regarding women's bodily attractiveness and unattractiveness, which the authors consider indicative of the socially and culturally accepted perception and evaluation of women primarily on the basis of their looks (pp. 91–101). The authors also notice semantic asymmetries encoding and perpetuating societal sexism levelled at men (p. 138). The discussion of this problem is, however, confined to the enumeration of expressions describing alcohol abusers, losers, troublemakers and homosexuals which almost exclusively pertain to males (pp. 125–137). Importantly, the majority of the material presented in this part was garnered in a lexicographic analysis, with a small proportion of language data obtained from respondents. This casts doubt on the representativeness of a significant portion of the lexis provided, given the disparities between language recorded in (rather dated) dictionaries and the patterns of actual usage.

The same chapter includes an illuminating section concerning the invisibility of women in texts of undeniable social and legal importance, such as university regula-

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<sup>1</sup> To illustrate the latter, the authors observe that words such as *szmata*, *dupa*, *lajdak/lajdaczka* and *ladaco/ladaczka* have negative, erotic undertones if used in reference to females but lack a similar colouring when referring to males. In turn, in the *PWN–Oxford English–Polish Dictionary* (2002), *szmata* is translated as *slag/scumbag* in reference to a man, and as *slag/slut* in reference to a woman; likewise, *dupa* – *ass-hole* when referring to a man, and *ass* when referring to a woman. As for *lajdak*, the translation proposed for a man is *bastard/rouge*, whereas for a woman – *slut*.

tions, acts of Parliament and school textbooks. Karwatowska and Szpyra-Kozłowska demonstrate how authors' lack of care to formulate their thoughts in a gender-unbiased way contributes to women's apparent absence from the social reality that the texts describe and powerfully shape. What seems particularly noteworthy in this part of the book is the account of schoolbook excerpts and a description of a leaflet issued by the Office of the Committee for European Integration. The brochure, despite the EU's boasted prioritisation of gender equality, is the epitome of linguistic bias. The example pinpoints a problem that undeniably needs a closer investigation and a subsequent debate.

Chapter 3 presents the results of a study conducted by the authors among secondary school pupils. The first part of the survey investigated how teenagers (40 boys and 40 girls) view the other sex and how gender identity affects the ways people perceive and describe others. The informants participated in an association test, and were then asked to link the nouns *chłopak* (E. *boy*) and *dziewczyna* (E. *girl*) with adjectives and to provide their definitions and synonyms. The impressive amount of data presented here demonstrate that the youngsters endorse the prevalent gender stereotypes encoded in the Polish language (p. 167). In the subsequent study another group of 120 subjects were asked to give their interpretations of phrases and proverbs that had been pre-selected by the authors for their sexist overtones (pp. 170–197). The results obtained in this part of the study demonstrate that despite certain differences between young men and women, the informants of both sexes subscribe to the sexist standpoint expressed in the linguistic prompts provided. (For instance, as many as 80% of the girls agreed with the proverbs and fixed expressions which ascribed volatility, weepiness and garrulousness to females, and the sense of honour and tenacity to males.) Thus, also this part of the research shows that young Poles endorse gender stereotypes perpetuated by the language they use. However, the authors point to the fact that only 38.3% of the subjects demonstrated that they were familiar with the sexist proverbs provided (p. 192). This, the authors infer, may mean that the sexist proverbs are likely to disappear from Poles' linguistic repertoire (p. 196). However, it seems slightly hasty to suggest that the unfamiliarity with the sexist proverbs can be interpreted as an early indicator of gradual elimination of sexism in Polish. Rather, the demise of sexist expressions is a side effect of the change in the phraseological repertoire of the young generation. Perhaps the traditional figurative proverbs in question (e.g. *baba z wozu, koniom lżej* E. ≈ *with a woman off the wagon, it's easier for the horses*, *gdzie diabeł nie może, tam babę pośle* E. ≈ *where the Devil can't, he sends a woman*, *kobieta najlepszym przyjacielem człowieka* E. ≈ *woman is a man's best friend*) have become irrelevant to the young speakers' experience and viewpoints. Nevertheless, these viewpoints are still visibly sexist; they were identified as such by the authors in the youth slang recorded in the previous survey. This may mean that the youngsters have already internalised numerous gender stereotypes in the socialisation process, which transpires in their language use. What seems baffling in the light of the book's explicit anti-sexist agenda is the authors' conviction that students

should be familiarised with the sexist proverbs in the process of their education for the sake of maintaining the cultural heritage encoded in their language (p. 197).

In the final (and somewhat extraneous) part of the survey, devoted to politeness, the authors conducted two questionnaires among 70 male and 70 female secondary school pupils. In the first one, the subjects were asked about their own politeness strategies in communicating with peers (greeting, saying goodbye and thank you, apologizing, comforting, complimenting and criticizing) (p. 200). In the second questionnaire, the students expressed their opinions on whether being polite is necessary and why people are polite. Some minor gender-related patterns surfaced in the results, notably the growing vulgarisation of boys' verbal strategies and the girls' greater use of emotional markers. However, the gender differences in politeness are in fact levelled out by the tendency of the girls to adopt the behaviours so far typical of boys.

Even though the studies conducted by Karwatowska and Szpyra-Kozłowska fill a major gap in the Polish language-and-gender research and provide an impressive amount of new data, certain issues concerning data collection methods and the presentation of the results should be addressed here. First, the choice of secondary school pupils as the only group of informants seems controversial. The authors' rationale is such that young people's repertoire encompasses both formal language and youth slang (p. 139). Also, teenagers are likely to have a substantial influence on the form of Polish in the future. Nevertheless, it should be considered that this group is special at least in two important regards. First, teenagers demonstrate significant creativity in forming neologisms; on the other hand, (youth) slang expressions are relatively short-lived and group-specific, which means that their impact may be temporary and socially restricted. Secondly, cross-sex relations at this age, whether romantic or antagonistic, are usually intense, which may render the results of research into youngsters very different from those of a study across age groups. These two considerations clearly question the representativeness of the data gathered, especially in the context of the authors' declared aim to explore the language of an average Polish language user (p. 139). In fact, the informants partaking in their research do not even represent an average young Polish user, as they are pupils of one type of secondary school only. Further, conducting a parallel study in a different age group would also lend some argumentative power to the authors' conclusions on politeness in which they point to a growing vulgarization of language use (p. 220). This observation about a change in progress, however, is not anchored in any contrastive point in time – either in the lifetime of the informants or in a corpus gathered among their peers in the past. Moreover, in the association test, the relatively high number of evaluative expressions of attitudes (especially negative out-group and positive in-group ones) is noteworthy. Clearly, both parts of the research lead to the identification of the antagonistic and/or affectionate motivations behind the gender relations among teenagers. However, although the linguistic data seem to credibly illustrate what is commonly known about the ways adolescents perceive the other sex, a more inquisitive reader is left wondering how the survey questions would have been answered by older respondents. Thus, especially in a book whose title lets readers expect a

more general linguistic representation of gender in Polish, parallel analyses across age groups and social groups would give a more balanced picture of gender issues as reflected in the language of Poles.

Another point should be made about the way the data and the results are presented in the book. Firstly, considering the complexity of the study, it would have made the book much more readable if more of the results had been demonstrated graphically. Likewise, in the discussion of informants' emotional and sarcastic reactions to sexist proverbs and expressions (pp. 194–195), the authors are inconsistent in ascribing the opinions to informants of either sex. Further, the language obtained in the first survey is, as the authors themselves noticed (p. 166), evaluative. This suggests that the subjects concentrated on the connotative meanings of the words *boy* and *girl* rather than on the denotative ones. The former are known to elude simple dictionary codification. Still, the presentation of the data consists in providing tables with word lists compiled from the students' responses and only at times do the authors manage to organize the data in a reader-friendly way (for instance, when the answers given in the association test on page 144 are organized into semantic subfields). In short, the admittedly sizeable body of data could have been presented in a more accessible way.

Chapter 4 is a highly informative and comprehensive review of Polish linguists' attitudes to linguistic sexism. It brings a picture of a vast diversity of opinion among (socio)linguists (pp. 250–265). To illustrate, some Polish linguists completely ignore the problem (pp. 251–252). For instance, language and gender asymmetries, and even the word *sexism* itself, are not accounted for in recent editions (1999) of encyclopaedias of the Polish language and linguistics. Some linguists discuss the matters of concern without taking a stance (pp. 252–253). Yet another group critically approach the sexist bias implicit in the contemporary patterns of language use in Polish and are outspoken about the way it victimizes women. At the end of this continuum are feminist linguists who promote a decisive fight against linguistic sexism in Polish (pp. 260–265).

Next, the authors describe the atmosphere surrounding the idea of non-sexist language reform in Polish. Apart from examining the opinions of scholars, Karwatowska and Szypra-Kozłowska investigated the views of young lay speakers. In both environments, people seem rather adverse to any changes leading to the reduction of sexism in Polish. The main reasons for which the most prominent Polish linguists do not warm to the idea of reforming language are personal aversion to the prescriptivist intervention into language, the conviction that language adapts to social and mental changes independently, and the problematic nature of the reformed language forms.<sup>2</sup> As for the lay speakers examined, 70 secondary school pupils were briefly informed on the topic of

<sup>2</sup> For example, the proposed reformed feminine professional/occupational terms are semantically ambiguous (*dypłomatka*, *pilotka*), phonetically awkward (*pediatrka*), or just sound slightly "exotic" because of being new and infrequent (*filolożka*); most of them also sound a little funny because the feminine gender suffix *-ka* (cf. *kot* – *kotka*) happens to be identical with the diminutive suffix (cf. *lampa* – *lampka*) (cf. also Warchol-Schlottmann 2005).

linguistic sexism. Next, the subjects were asked if they had been aware of the problem, what their attitude to the phenomenon was and whether they considered any measures against it necessary. The informants demonstrated relatively little awareness of linguistic sexism (70% of the respondents did not consider it a problem), and most of them indicated a distinct non-critical reliance on tradition as what ultimately justifies common linguistic practices (p. 272). Although the decision to contrast the opinions of linguists with the ones of lay language users should be appreciated, the fact that again only young people were surveyed (plus the sample was not sex-balanced) seems to diminish the diagnostic potential of the study. Also, the inconsistent use of percentage values in the discussion of results and lack of a graphic presentation of the results work against the descriptive value of this piece of research.

Finally in the same chapter, Karwatowska and Szpyra-Kozłowska place the Polish tradition of language and gender in a wider context of research done by scholars in different countries (and about other languages). The authors succinctly outline how some researchers abroad address and explicate the social and cognitive implications of linguistic sexism. This is followed by a brief account of the non-sexist language reforms of German, French and English. By expounding the intricate interdependencies between the actual changes in language and the mindset predominant in both the academic and a wider social environment, Karwatowska and Szpyra-Kozłowska prevented the non-expert reader from wondering why Polish has not undergone transformations that other, major European languages have. This makes the chapter discussed a very strong point of this book. Nevertheless, at times the selection of sociolinguists referred to could have been more discerning. For instance, when presenting approaches to gender-based differences in language and communication, the authors mention Deborah Tannen's *You just don't understand* and John Gray's *Men are from Mars, women are from Venus*. Addressing this vein of literature seems controversial, as both the quality of data and the depth of the analysis these books offer put them outside the academic study of language and gender (cf. Freed 1992; Trömmel-Plötz 1991) and, thus, undermine them as a reliable point of reference in a serious discussion of language and gender. Also, on more than one occasion the authors refer to Anne Moir and David Jessel's *Brain sex: The real difference between men and women*. Apart from the fact that this book, because of its aims, favours breadth over depth, it is noteworthy that the biological determinism Jessel and Moir advocate evokes conflicting reactions among sociologists (cf. Eckert – McConnell-Ginet 2003: 10–15). It is a pity that Karwatowska and Szpyra-Kozłowska have not at least briefly discussed other traditions of language and gender theory and research.

All in all, Karwatowska and Szpyra-Kozłowska have managed to make an undeniable contribution to the Polish research on language and gender. For one thing, the book has popularized the foreign (mostly English-language) scholarly publications on language and gender. Secondly, the book offers the first extensive presentation of gender asymmetries in the Polish language as well as a discussion of the ways linguistic sexism has been tackled in Polish linguistics. Noteworthy are also the richness of reference

sources and the breadth of issues discussed. Despite the methodological shortcomings, the surveys conducted bring interesting results, generate even more questions about language and gender in Polish and thus indicate new research areas to pursue. On the basis of the material analysed, the authors' own observations and those of other researchers (e.g. Handke 1994), Karwatowska and Szpyra-Kozłowska enumerate the major obstacles that the non-sexist language reform is likely to encounter – notably Poles' low awareness of linguistic sexism and their reliance on tradition in justifying gender inequality in language (pp. 274–275). Despite the general atmosphere around the anti-sexist reform, the authors finish their contribution by listing the most pressing problems that should be placed firmly on the social and linguistic agenda (p. 283). Among other things, they appeal for a fair representation of women in official documents, at present written with a heavy sexist bias, and encourage the avoidance of sexist expressions in everyday usage. Importantly, the authors emphasize that such changes in Polish are not likely to be implemented successfully as long as the problem is discussed only in the academic circles but is absent from the social and cultural awareness of lay language users (p. 283). Therefore, *Lingwistyka płci* is a valuable and timely initiative to sensitize Polish sociolinguists (as well as researchers in other fields, policymakers, teachers and students) to the ways in which language can oppress either of the sexes. Thanks to its thoughtful and structured treatment of the matter at hand, the book will serve as a general reference for those familiar with, as well as those uninitiated to, the problem of linguistic sexism.

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