Research Article

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Language, Prejudice, Awareness, and Resistance

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Abstract: As an introduction to the themed special volume on Language and Prejudice, this short editorial highlights aspects related to prejudice *within*, *through*, and *towards* language as well as how prejudice and stereotyping can affect our *perception* of language. We provide short summaries of the articles included in the volume and contextualise these within the general thematic framework. The article also discusses the roles and responsibilities of language studies in raising awareness of issues related to language and prejudice, and how this forms part of a more general resistance against xenophobia and sexism.

Keywords: language and prejudice, linguistic stereotyping, sexism, xenophobia, reversed linguistic stereotyping

1 Introduction

Since the refugee crisis in 2015, many parts of Europe have seen a steady rise of populist right-wing nationalism (Wodak and Krzyżanowski 2017). This movement seems to be part of a global trend also visible in the US, Russia, Brazil, India, and many other nations. A key instrument in such populist drifts has been rhetoric based on stereotyping and prejudice, where the logic of xenophobia and sexism has been applied against any group seen fit to fill the role of the “Other” – for example, refugees, immigrants, ethnic minorities, the Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (or questioning), and intersex LGBTQI community, and women. In this way, the language of prejudice has been instrumental in undermining the democratic foundations of egalitarian humanistic principles that most of us have come to taken for granted. Constant media exposure of leaders such as Trump has led to a gradual normalisation of a rhetoric of prejudice that also risks sullyng our collective sub/consciousness, gradually pushing the boundaries for the acceptable and reinforcing stereotypic tunnel vision. In all of these, language is a key component, and raising awareness of the subtle and complex linguistic mechanisms operating under the surface structures of a seemingly neutral political statement or “logical” claim, is, we would argue, an inoculation and first line of defence against bigotry and prejudice.

It was against this backdrop that we organised the symposium *Language and Prejudice* (13–15 November 2019), financed by the Swedish Research Council and the Wallenberg Foundation, and hosted by the School of Humanities, Education and Social Sciences at Örebro University, Sweden. Our ambition was to bring together researchers from around the world working within this field in order to exchange ideas and knowledge. As abstracts came in, a number of sub-themes emerged. These included aspects of linguistic stereotyping related to accent (primarily native and non-native accents), gender, and

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intersectionality issues but also the so-called reversed linguistic stereotyping, i.e. how “attributions of a speaker’s group membership trigger distorted evaluations of that person’s speech” (Kang and Rubin 2009: 441). The language of prejudice also emerged as a common theme, as did questions of how prejudice is hidden within language. In summary, most contributions could be placed under one or more of the following variations of the central theme:

- prejudice *within* language,
- prejudice expressed *through* language,
- prejudice *towards* language, and
- prejudice and the *perception* of language.

Another unifying topic that emerged from the presentations was the idea of “resistance” – a common ambition to reveal structural language prejudice and to raise awareness of the same in order to bring about change. This stance is not uncontroversial, but a wish to counteract linguistic injustices has arguably been a motivational force since the emergence of sociolinguistics as a discipline in the 1960s and 1970s (see the early work of William Labov (1972) and Robin Lakoff (1975), for example). However, such activist research also places extra demands on well-developed methods and empirical rigour in order to install the confidence needed when making, what to some may be, controversial claims. Methodological rigour was also evidenced in the presentations of the symposium, and we were struck by the range and quality of methods represented. These included critical discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, matched-guise techniques, linguistic landscape studies, social media text mining studies as well as more traditional questionnaire enquiries.

Although the event was small, we were also pleasantly surprised by the geographical spread of our presenters. Countries represented included France, Germany, Poland, the UK, Sweden, Finland, Russia, India, Kuwait, Nigeria, Ghana, and the US. This meant that the theme was approached from various cultural perspectives, something which really made clear the fact that while prejudice seems to be a universal phenomenon, it can take very different shapes depending on where in the world you find yourself. As is usually the case with these events, not all the presentations found their way into this publication. Many of the presenters simply had too many other commitments to even attempt submission. Abstracts and summaries are however available on our symposium website: <https://www.stereotyping.se/conference.html>.

2 Overview of contributions

Seven papers included in this volume cover important sub-categories of the central theme Language and Prejudice as described previously. In other words, the articles deal with issues related to prejudice *within*, *through*, and *towards* language as well as how prejudice and stereotyping can affect our *perception* of language. The studies also represent various methodological traditions ranging from matched-guise techniques to critical discourse analysis.

In her paper based on the keynote presentation “Gender, language and prejudice: implicit sexism in the discourse of Boris Johnson,” **Jane Sunderland** explores structures of prejudice and sexism hidden *within* language by identifying various lexical asymmetries and associated “lexical gaps” in English (*henpecked* but not *cock-pecked*? for example). Through illustrative examples of actual use in public discourse from public and social media (“Meghan Markle is ‘wearing the trousers’ in her relationship with Prince Harry,” for example), Sunderland (2020) shows how sexist discourse “not only reflects the world but contributes to constructing it.” This aspect of sexist discourse is further explored in the analysis of the actual language use of Boris Johnson. Here Sunderland’s careful analysis includes three examples in particular (*man up*, *girly swot*, and *big girl’s blouse*), which all build on a discourse of “women as ineffectual.” By analysing these examples in context and from the perspective of intentionality, Sunderland (2020) effectively shows how Johnson expresses prejudice against women *through* language in order to build his own image as a “man of action” and “a man of the people.” But Sunderland (2020) ends on a hopeful note. Using the example *girly swot*, a

phrase which prompted intertextual use in the production of T-shirts and jewellery which all exemplified positive usage of the phrase, she illustrates how *reclaiming*, i.e. how prejudice language can be reused for progressive ends (Talbot 2010), is just one way of raising awareness about, and resisting, prejudice language use.

Cheryl Glenn's (2020) article "The language of rhetorical feminism, anchored in hope," based on the second keynote of the symposium, also pursues the topics of feminism and resistance. Glenn questions traditional patriarchal rhetorical practices and conventions that place emphasis on confrontation, proof-driven logic, persuasion, and domination. She provides an alternative model, the so-called *rhetorical feminism*, which instead seeks to establish dialogue and collaboration and which emphasises inclusiveness, understanding, and respect for the marginalised. This alternative to hegemonic rhetoric draws on a different rhetorical toolset: dialogue, personal experiences, empathy, emotions, reconciliation, and calm reflection. It is a move away from the self-interested practices of traditional rhetoric and seen as "crucial to our survival as a species," according to Glenn. She then goes on to illustrate various examples and constituent practices of rhetorical feminisms. These include *disidentification*, the intentional questioning, and decoupling of rhetoric with the dominant expectations of winning, dominating, and conquering. Alternative functions and approaches to rhetoric are also presented, such as *invitational rhetoric* and *dialogue-driven understandings*, where the praxis is to speak *with* rather than *to* an audience, and where the ambition is to understand and be understood rather than to persuade. Glenn also discusses *rhetorical listening* and *productive silence* as alternative practices which allow us to "enrich and enlarge the rhetorical transaction." Glenn sums up by emphasising the importance of hope in any process of change.

Change and hope are also topics in **Vlada Baranova** and **Kapitolina Fedorova's** article "Overcoming aggressive monolingualism: Prejudices and linguistic diversity in Russian megalopolises," which pursues the theme of language prejudice *towards* non-native accents and other languages. The authors consider and discuss signs of change in what has been a monolingual and normative language ideology in Russian society, and whose origin can be found in the early years of the Soviet period. Based on meta-discourse data on language attitudes (interviews and online discussion forums) and the linguistic landscapes of St. Petersburg and Moscow, Baranova and Fedorova (2020) can show that normative monolingual attitudes are still dominant. Their data indicate that many native speakers hold negative stereotypic opinions about migrant languages and their use in public spaces, and also about migrants' use of Russian, both of which relate to and reflect negative stereotypes about the migrants themselves. These attitudes affect these migrants' groups who find themselves in a double bind where their native language and their accented Russian are looked down upon. However, it is not a facade without cracks. There are some signs of an ongoing change. In relating their data to similar but slightly older studies, Baranova and Fedorova (2020) identify some traces of an increasing tolerance towards multilingual communication: more instances of multilingual communication are mentioned by informants, and linguistic landscape data reveal an increased visibility of non-Russian languages in public spaces, for example.

Attitudes *towards* speakers of a non-standard variety is further explored in the article "Mediatized Taiwanese Mandarin: A text-mining approach to speaker stereotypes" by **Chun-Yi Peng** and **Nicholas Garcia**. The authors use a text-mining approach in order to explore Chinese mainlanders' views on the Taiwanese variety of Mandarin, as represented in TV dramas. Using key qualifiers scraped from online forums discussing Taiwanese Mandarin (also known as *gangtaiqiang*) and Taiwanese television programs, Peng and Garcia (2020) construct a lexical network with links between words or phrases that co-occur in the data set, which in turn reveals distinct themes and conceptual categories linked to this variety. Their subsequent analysis demonstrates that Taiwanese Mandarin carries associations of "effeminacy" and "pretension" for Chinese mainlanders. The authors argue that these associations are partly due to influences from Korean representations of metrosexuality, instantiated and stylised in the hybrid masculinity of, for example, "flowerboys" that frequently occur in Taiwanese idol dramas, and partly due to a patriarchal culture that equates mainland China's ascending global power with traditional notions of manhood.

Prejudice expressed *through* language is the topic of **Mourhaf Kazzaz's** article "Investigating the Syrian 'Other' in Donald J. Trump's Twitter Campaign Rhetoric." Using the theoretical frameworks represented by the *Ideological Square* (van Dijk 2013) and *Proximity Theory* (Cap 2013), Kazzaz (2020) explores the discursive techniques employed by Donald J. Trump in the portrayal of Syrian refugees in

the 2016 election campaign. Through close readings of 32 tweets, Kazzaz (2020) is able to show how representations of Syrian refugees as a threat was instrumental in furthering the political agenda of Donald Trump by appealing to anti-immigrant sentiments. For example, the group was incorrectly portrayed as “terrorists” and as an uncontrollable human “flood” threatening the southern border. Furthermore, Kazzaz (2020) shows how Trump denigrates previous leaders who did not recognise “the threat” as “naive and stupid.” In this way, Kazzaz (2020) argues that ideological “othering” of a vulnerable and marginalised group not only contributed to Trump’s winning the elections but also facilitated later controversial policies of his administration, such as a travel ban for people from seven Muslim-majority countries.

In the article, “Linguistic gender stereotypes and their effects on perception: A matched-guise study with focus on conversational styles,” **Mattias Lindvall-Östling, Mats Deutschmann and Anders Steinvall** (2020) address how stereotypic preconceptions about gender and conversational behaviour may affect observers’ *perceptions* of a speaker’s performance. On the basis of one recording which had been digitally manipulated to create a gender switch, the authors could employ updated matched-guise techniques that allowed them to compare participants’ reactions to identical conversations, only differing with regard to the perceived gender of one of the participants. Their analysis reveals that participants perceived the male version as taking more floor space and interrupting more than the female version of the same character. The authors could also show that the participants’ explicit stereotypes matched these patterns, so that interrupting and taking space were regarded as primarily male behaviours, while signalling interest was regarded as a female feature. Based on these results, the authors argue that stereotypic preconceptions about gender and conversational behaviour may skew perceptions of similar linguistic behaviour.

Finally prejudice *towards* language and its effect on the *perception* of language is explored in the article “Combatting Linguistic Stereotyping and Prejudice by Evoking Stereotypes,” where **Mats Deutschmann and Anders Steinvall** describe their work aimed at raising awareness of issues related to linguistic stereotyping. The authors give an account of awareness-raising activities they have used in university courses in both Sweden and the Seychelles, which demonstrate to students first-hand how stereotypes affect our judgement of conversational behaviour and speakers. For example, response patterns from matched-guise inspired exposures to conversations where accent has been manipulated show that the perceived accent of the speaker (native vs non-native, for example) will affect students’ judgement of other aspects of language performance as well as the speakers’ character. Deutschmann and Steinvall’s (2020) analyses of students’ written reflective responses after debriefing seminars suggest that discussions and reflections inspired by their own response patterns led students to raised self-awareness of matters related to language and stereotyping. The authors also provide a critical examination of the methodology applied, and contextualise their work and ambitions in a broader discussion on how educational institutions can actively contribute to fighting (language) prejudice and discrimination.

3 Conclusion

All of the studies in this volume illustrate the powerful role that language plays as a social cue for prejudice when we judge others, and also how sexism and xenophobia are hidden within, and conveyed through, language. In this sense, language, and our impressions thereof, not only reflects the structures that surround us but also helps shape the same. By the same token, language research can have a real impact on raising awareness of and dismantling language prejudice and discrimination by providing objective fact input to what often seems to be polarised folklinguistic debate based on unfounded “opinions.” Given this responsibility, it is more important than ever that we take care to remain self-critical and objective in our claims in order to counteract oversimplifications of what is a very complex reality. After all, such oversimplifications easily turn into stereotypes, which in turn form the seeds of prejudice.

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