Susanne Günthner

Communicative practices involving gender-inclusive language in German: an interactional perspective on gender-related person reference markers and their inherent potential for contextualizing social meaning

Even though we are currently confronted with heated debates on gender-related, gender-conscious, or gender-inclusive language use in German, analyses of communicative practices involving gender-inclusive person reference markers in authentic everyday face-to-face interactions are still rare. By focusing on gender-conscious practices in spoken German interactions and thus on the issue of how participants in face-to-face interactions activate, demand, comment on, criticize, or justify gender-related language, our study will address this research gap. In addition, it explores the close interweaving of gender practices with contextual aspects (e. g. the social field of interaction, the emerging genre, the sequential environment, the situated action, recipient orientation, etc.) and socio-cultural aspects of gender relations.

Furthermore, the analysis shows that the instantiation of gender-related reference forms does far more than just refer to persons and social groups: Such forms function as meta-pragmatic signs contextualizing social meaning on various levels.

German grammar traditionally adheres to a binary gender construct (male-female) in person reference. With its androcentric bias, this gender division is deeply encoded in nominal and pronominal person reference forms such as "der Verkäufer" ("salesman") vs. "die Verkäuferin" ("saleswoman") and "er" ("he") vs. "sie" ("she"). German grammar virtually obliges speakers to classify the people they are talking about in a gender-specific way, for example: "Yesterday at the market, an extremely nice sales*man* ("Verkäufer") served me. *He* was Uzbek and told me …" vs. "Yesterday at the market, an extremely nice sales*woman* ("Verkäuferin") served me. *She* was Uzbek and told me …". As gender-neutral alternatives are extremely rare in German, when gender is irrelevant, it is not possible to say: "Yesterday at the market, an extremely nice sales*person* served me. *It* was Uzbek and told me …". Primarily used for inanimates, the neuter is considered "reifying" in German and thus inappropriate for personal references.

Influenced by 'Feminist Linguistics' in the 1980s and 'Gender Linguistics' over the past 10 years (Günthner/Hüpper/Spieß (eds.) 2012; Kotthoff/Nübling 2024), the debate on gender-conscious language has focused primarily on the widespread 'generic masculine' for person references in German. This masculine form, which generally refers to males only, can also be used as a generic term to include people of all genders. Consequently, when the masculine reference form is used, it is often unclear whether women are also included.

Analogously, the coding of gender in German grammar reveals the following:

male   – female
unmarked – marked
norm   – deviation

This asymmetry in personal reference – sedimented in German grammar – with its underlying conceptualization of 'man = norm' and 'woman = deviation' has been discussed, among other things, as a reflection of the socially prevailing hierarchy of the sexes, leading to heated debates in the women's movement at the end of the 1970s (Trömel-Plötz 1978; Pusch 1980, 1984). Over the last 40 years, various 'Guidelines for Gender-Fair Use of Language' have been published including replacements for the androcentric 'generic masculine'. The proposed gender-conscious alternatives include the use of "Beidnennung" ('both nouns') (e. g. "Verkäuferinnen und Verkäufer"), the so-called "Binnen-I" ('medial capital I') (e. g. "VerkäuferIn"), nominal participles (e. g. "Verkaufende"), the "Gender-Gap" (represented by an underscore) (e. g. "Verkäufer_in"), the "Genderstern" ('gender star') (e. g. "Verkäufer*in"), or a colon (e. g. "Verkäufer:in"). The last three options are meant to stand for the whole spectrum of gender identities. In spoken German, gender-conscious options include the "gender pause", i. e. the articulation of a glottal plosive [ʔ] following the masculine stem before the feminine suffix ("in" or "innen") complements the stem (e. g. "Verkäuferʔin").

Drawing on methods of Interactional Linguistics, this paper addresses gender-conscious practices in spoken German interactions by focusing on *how* participants in face-to-face interaction activate, demand, comment on, criticize, or justify gender-related language. It will contribute to our understanding of how grammar (i. e. 'gendered' and 'ungendered' forms of person reference in German) is used within social interaction and how participants activate, demand, criticize, justify, and account for their 'gendered' or 'ungendered' language use. The analysis is based on 32 face-to-face interactions that were collected in the context of the lAuDa database (linguistic audio database; Günthner, University of Münster) and transcribed according to GAT 2 (Selting et al. 2009). Thirty of the conversations are available as audio recordings and two as video recordings; 21 of the conversations are dyadic and 11 are multi-party interactions with 3–5 participants.

The qualitative study does not claim to be representative; rather, we aim to show procedures of context-contingent use of gender-related language in ongoing spoken interactions. Based on illustrative examples, I will address the following questions: How do participants use gender-conscious forms of person reference in spoken interactions, i. e. what grammatical markers do they mobilize when referring to persons of different gender groups? Do certain gender-inclusive or gender-neutral markings tend to emerge in specific sequential contexts, in various (formal and informal) genres, or among particular social groups? In what contexts and by what means do interactants comment on and account for their ways of applying gender-conscious person reference markers?

Previous studies – largely based on monologic text genres, experimental research, or written language-oriented (online) surveys – provide observations on potential attitudes toward gender-conscious language. Still, the extent to which these findings can be transferred to linguistic reality in everyday interactions remains uncertain. So far, we do not know how sequential and contextual factors influence how speakers use gender-conscious forms and how various gender-related markers are interpreted and inferred in everyday life. Consequently, it seems logical to study gender practices where they occur (Hanks 2006): in everyday interaction.

By studying gender-related practices of person reference in everyday spoken discourse, it becomes apparent that in addition to their function of referring to persons, they act as a resource for contextualizing social positioning and thus reflect participants' "meta-pragmatic awareness" (Silverstein 1993; Verschueren 2000) concerning the ongoing gender discourse. Furthermore, these markers constitute relevant tools for indicating participants' stances and reflecting their social positioning regarding ongoing gender debates. The analysis, thus, concentrates on sequences revealing metacommunicative assessments, accounts, and justifications of participants' gender practices, aspects of situative recalibration of gender discourse (i. e. applying humorous modalizations), stancetaking, and social positioning concerning gender practices.

The data illustrate, once again, that linguistic forms in their situated use do far more than convey propositions – or, in the present case, establish references to present and absent persons. They indicate speakers' "metapragmatic awareness" about the current gender discourse. In other words, in addition to their actual task of referring to groups of people, gender-related personal reference forms carry an inherent contextualization potential, functioning as "metapragmatic emblems" (Agha 2007), carrying indexical dimensions on various levels: recipient-orientation and -adaptation, gender-related self- and other-positioning, stancetaking related to current gender debates, constructing social affiliations or disaffiliations with social and political groups, activating interaction modalities, etc. Given their indexical multidimensionality, one can speak of a metapragmatic re-semiotization of grammatical gender markers as "social emblems".

Focusing on the actual use of gender-related personal references in their "natural habitat" (Schegloff 1987), i. e. in everyday conversations, broadens our understanding of how interactants use, negotiate, criticize, or make fun of gender-sensitive language in intersubjective action.

Purely system-linguistic analyses of gendered (or non-gendered) personal reference forms that ignore the indexing options of social meaning located on different levels fall short in several respects: We are dealing with a multi-layered area in which aspects of grammar interact with socio-cultural factors and usage conventions in concrete communicative practice and indexical relationships coincide with contextual or socio-cultural parameters in the process of the communicative situation.

References

Agha, Asif (2007): Language and social relations. (= Studies in the Social and Cultural Foundation of Language 24). Cambridge i. e.: Cambridge University Press.

Günthner, Susanne/Hüpper, Dagmar/Spieß, Constanze (eds.) (2012): Genderlinguistik. Sprachliche Konstruktionen von Geschlechtsidentität. (= Linguistik – Impulse & Tendenzen 45). Berlin/New York: De Gruyter.

Hanks, William F. (2006): Context, communicative. In: Brown, Keith (Hg.): Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics. 2nd ed. Vol. 3. Amsterdam i. e.: Elsevier, pp. 115–128.

Kotthoff, Helga/Nübling, Damaris (2024): Genderlinguistik. Eine Einführung in Sprache, Gespräch und Geschlecht. 2nd ed. (= Narr Studienbücher). Tübingen: Narr.

Pusch, Luise F. (1980): Das Deutsche als Männersprache. Diagnose und Therapievorschläge. In: Linguistische Berichte 69 (Themenheft: Sprache, Geschlecht und Macht), pp. 59–74.

Pusch, Luise F. (1984): Das Deutsche als Männersprache. Aufsätze und Glossen zur feministischen Linguistik. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

Schegloff, Emanuel A. (1987): Between micro and macro. Contexts and other connections. In: Alexander, Jeffrey C./Giesen, Bernhard/Münch, Richard/Smelser, Neil J. (eds.): The micro-macro link. 2nd ed. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. 207–234.

Selting, Margret/Auer, Peter/Barth-Weingarten, Dagmar/Bergmann, Jörg/Bergmann, Pia/Birkner, Karin/ Elizabeth Couper-Kuhlen/Deppermann, Arnulf/Gilles, Peter/Günthner, Susanne/Hartung, Martin/Kern, Friederike/Mertzlufft, Christine/Meyer. Christian/Morek, Miriam/Oberzaucher, Frank/Peters, Jörg/ Quasthoff, Uta/Schütte, Wilfried/Stukenbrock, Anja/Uhmann, Susanne (2009): Gesprächsanalytisches Transkriptionssystem 2 (GAT 2). In: Gesprächsforschung – Online-Zeitschrift zur verbalen Interaktion 10, pp. 353–402.

Silverstein, Michael (1993): Metapragmatic discourse and metapragmatic function. In: Lucy, John A. (ed.): Reflexive language. Reported speech and metapragmatics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 33–58.

Trömel-Plötz, Senta (1978): Linguistik und Frauensprache. In: Linguistische Berichte 57, pp. 49–68.

Verschueren, Jef (2000): Notes on the role of metapragmatic awareness in language use. In: Pragmatics 10, 4, pp. 439–456.