

## INTRODUCTION

### GENDER AND LANGUAGE: PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES

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The issue of inclusive, non-sexist, gender-equal or gender-sensitive language has taken hold at a social and political level, with different positions (as happens whenever the *status quo* is shaken). This development is not restricted to one particular language or to one particular country, but is relevant in many Western countries no matter which language is concerned. The issue has also entered the academic field, within the scope of linguistics or language sciences, with considerable dynamism at the international level, focusing on both morphological aspects and the history of the language(s) as well as factors linked to discursive uses (see Constantin de Chanay, Chevalier & Gardelle 2017; Cerquiglini 2018; Rabatel & Rosier 2019; de Miguel 2022; Diewald & Steinhauer 2022; Diewald forthcoming; Yeaton, Muelas-Gil, & Scontras 2023, a.o.). In Portugal, however, scientific discussion has remained limited, despite extensive legislation which, at least since 2009, has recommended the use of inclusive language, particularly in public administration, and the publication of numerous inclusive language manuals. Recent research on gender bias and possible gender markers in women's and men's discourse (see Joaquim 2021; 2022; Magalhães 2019; 2022; Pinto *et al.* 2021, a.o.) can be highlighted. Yet, academic work focusing directly on (non)sexist, inclusive, or neutral language is limited (see Matos 2020; Coutinho 2021; Delgado 2023). Thus, there is no generally accepted terminology so far. Furthermore, there are voices negating the use-

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fulness of the pursuit of gender-appropriate language, as can be seen in an article by Veloso (2017), posted on his personal website, somewhat outside of his academic work, where the author uses linguistic argumentation to deny the relevance of the issue in linguistic terms (for further details, see Coutinho 2021, 55-57).

In short, we can say that there are signs of resistance from both society and the linguistic community – as well as positions that seek and push for change. Therefore, we need to develop consistent thought from a linguistic point of view, which is the target of this volume.

Different perspectives can be considered. First, several layers of analysis must be distinguished, particularly between the notions of grammatical gender, semantic or lexical gender, social gender, and sex. While grammatical gender and lexical gender are a linguistic property of (individual) languages, social gender, and sex *per se* are language-independent factors; however, they interact with linguistic phenomena in various ways. In this sense, pragmatic and discursive approaches become a second relevant perspective, as they constitute a tool for bridging the gap between formal descriptions of languages and their contextualized uses: in this case, uses guided by feminist choices, which are politically and ideologically oriented. It can also be emphasized that, from a social interactionist conception of language (Voloshinov 1977 [1929]), the praxeological and gnoseological dimensions are part of how language intervenes in the social, permanently (re)constructing the world, or the so-called ‘real’. In this sense, choosing to speak about the world in a generic masculine way or choosing to do it in an inclusive way is a more or less conscious decision – made by those who use language, at the moment they use it. The question is not whether one language or another is sexist or not, but rather the possibilities that each language offers for speaking about the world in a radically non-sexist way. In fact, it would be more accurate to use a different terminology and refer to “sexist and non-inclusive communication”, rather than language *per se*. It is true that the norm – naturally fulfilling its role of regulation – acts as a brake on more or less improbable or even controversial choices. But its power is certainly no greater than that of the dynamism of language itself: as Coseriu (1987, 23) pointed out, a language should be considered “as a permanent ‘systematization’ rather than a closed system”. Consequently, it is expected that linguistic description should be able to cope with that same dynamism.

From this point of view, resistance is opposed to (meta)linguistic reflection and sustained research, which can provide a theoretical framework for the current state of affairs – or, more precisely, the state of gender-fair language(s). In fact, we are currently seeing a considerable diversity of solutions and strategies in this respect – some parity-based, others more broadly inclusive, some that use the system’s possibilities, others that force it intrusively. The linguistic contribution is not supposed to validate or not validate any of those solutions; instead, it is a matter of looking at what is in use and describing it – without prejudice or ideological

bias. If the description does not deal with regular and stable phenomena, it is worth remembering that this is a familiar process in the history of language(s) – only attenuated by the relative stability that writing and the multiple instances of linguistic normalization ensure. A linguistic approach is not supposed to condemn or deny this solution or that one; on the contrary, it can recognize the current experimentation and – where appropriate, or when appropriate – record (systematize, standardize) the uses (some uses) that may today fall outside the norm. A linguistic approach to gender-fair language can provide a means of understanding and analyzing current solutions, contributing to consolidating linguistic resources to meet the demands of equal and inclusive citizenship.

No one knows what language(s) will become tomorrow, in a hundred or five hundred years. That is not the point – at least when we take the point of view of descriptive linguistic research (and not just a normative approach). The important thing is not to silence or block the ongoing change (in the name of a non-existent immutability). As Coseriu (1988, 150) pointed out, “Nevertheless, the same is true for language as for other forms of culture: in language too, ‘change’ and growth is the primary event, and the product handed down the secondary one: *in linguistics too we should look forwards, not backwards*” (author’s italics).

These were the concerns that motivated our thematic dossier. The aim is to take a closer look at the perspectives and challenges that arise, from a linguistic point of view, from the relationship between language and gender – and from the tension (or even conflict) between grammar and (generally conservative) normative issues, on the one hand, and innovative and controversial gender-sensitive strategies in use in different languages, on the other. Let us emphasize this: the articles gathered here use different theoretical frameworks, but all are concerned with the social impact of language use and adopt a linguistic point of view – even if it is far from the mainstream of linguistics.

The first paper, “Quem inclusivo fala, sempre acerta: uma discussão sobre linguagem inclusiva”, signed by Daniela Leal, Jorge Peixoto Freitas, Sara Isabel Magalhães and Marisa Matias, develops a general approach to inclusive communication, assuming an intersectional approach (or the interaction between language, discrimination and performance) and emphasizing the role of language in defying stereotypes – with particular attention to gender stereotypes. In this sense, the paper reviews linguistic, political, and social forms of resistance to inclusive language, as well as institutional good practices, favoring the change of attitudes.

In the next paper, “Da inexistência à inclusão: análise linguística do direito ao voto das mulheres em Portugal”, Violeta Magalhães looks at constitutional and other legal documents relating to women’s right to vote in Portugal (from 1822 to 1979). Subscribing to a feminist critical discourse point of view, she aims to highlight that socio-political constraints, power structures, and patterns of gender inequality are expressed and can be understood through syntactic-semantic aspects, such as grammatical gender, among others.

Erika Velandia and Ernesto Cuba sign the third article – “Le pari glottoféministe, un agenda de recherche”. Assuming a social conception of language (in opposition to formal and mechanical conceptions), and embracing the performance paradigm (which establishes, following the work of Judith Butler, the anteriority of gender in relation to sex), the paper argues for a glottopolitical and glottofeminist point of view, as the title shows. This is the general framework to discuss the opposition between the hegemonic impositions of linguistic norms and subversive language practices.

In “Gender, Sexuality, & Shifting Styles: Knowledge production and codifying language use in style manuals”, Meg Robertson and Riki Thompson are concerned with language change and gender-neutral pronouns from the queer linguistic point of view. The paper reviews style guides (AMA, AP, APA, and MLA), focusing on the academic and professional attitudes concerning the singular *they* (as a strategy to overcome the binary gender categories). Their conclusions point out a general trend to promote gender-inclusive language; despite this, the singular *they* seems to remain unaccepted or to be treated with ambiguity.

The fifth article also proposes a reflection on gender neutrality and nonbinary language – associated, in this case, to decoloniality issues. Entitled “‘Que degenerados, uma vergonha’: a reação conservadora contra a linguagem inclusiva no discurso de posse da acadêmica Heloísa Teixeira”, and signed by Gabriel Chagas, Cristiane Soares and Gláucia V. Silva, the paper draws a parallel between colonial power relations and conservative attitudes towards non-binary language. The analysis of the comments on the discourse referred to in the title highlight a poor argumentation, against a strong concern for (hypothetical) linguistic purity.

The paper “Implicit Sexist Bias in Language and its Impact on Artificial Intelligence” assumes that languages are not sexist, but the way people use linguistic resources can produce sexist communication. This reinforces the need to think about inclusive language in a broader way, not exclusively focused on gender marking, as Andrea Ariño-Bizarro and Iraide Ibarretxe-Antuñano point out. And that’s why they analyze the sexist bias in explicit gender-marked structures and through pragmatic inferences associated to unmarked-gender structures. In a second section, the authors discuss the implications of sexist bias as a challenge for AI, particularly relevant when unmarked cases are taken in consideration.

The last paper is “Third Gender Marking in Spanish: Evaluation of current options from a linguistic change point of view”, where Irene Checa-García discusses the normative dimension of top-down approaches to language change, in contrast with the complexity of bottom-up ones. She argues for the advantages of a third gender in Spanish (in opposition to no gender, as an inclusive gender strategy), and compares different gender-inclusive strategies in use, evaluating them according to linguistic criteria that can point out the possibly most successful options.

As this brief presentation has shown, the diversity of perspectives within this thematic dossier is considerable. It includes different theoretical approaches (e.g. linguistic change, pragmatics and discourse analysis, queer linguistics), several languages analyzed (Portuguese, English, Spanish and French), various analytical topics in focus (sexist bias, stereotypes through language, gender-inclusive strategies, etc.), and different research attitudes (some more assertive, others more cautious or reflexive). We believe that this diversity is typical of the current state of language and gender issues, and we hope that it will stimulate further research on a significant issue at the interface between linguistics and society.

### Acknowledgements

The research of Antónia Coutinho is supported by Portuguese national funding through the FCT – Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology, I.P., as part of the project UIDB/LIN/03213/2020 and UIDP/LIN/03213/2020 – Linguistics Research Centre of NOVA University Lisbon (CLUNL).

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#### How to cite this article

[Chicago Style]:

Coutinho, Antónia, Gabriele Diewald, & María Muelas-Gil. 2024. “Introduction – Gender and Language: Perspectives and challenges.” *ex æquo* 49: 11-17. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22355/exaequo.2024.49.02>

[APA Style – adapted]:

Coutinho, Antónia, Diewald, Gabriele, & Muelas-Gil, María (2024). Introduction – Gender and Language: Perspectives and challenges. *ex æquo*, 49, 11-17. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22355/exaequo.2024.49.02>



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