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Introduction: Out of the norm?!

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Healthcare, product design, urban planning – across various domains, there seems to be a noticeable and often unconscious tendency to prioritize the perspectives and needs of men, while those of women and other genders are not taken into consideration. For example, randomized controlled studies in the medical field have shown that women are frequently underrepresented, with the male gender being treated as the default human being, and women and other genders as the exception. This can result in serious consequences for people who do not correspond to the norm, for instance in the detection of health problems or access to effective medical treatments (cf., e.g., Daitch et al. 2022).

Norms and deviations from them also play a crucial role in understanding how language is used, perceived, and has evolved within societies. Various linguistic traditions highlight the nature of language as a social institution, being

essentially based on conventions that members of a speech community follow in order to communicate. While most linguistic approaches within academia today prioritize a descriptive approach to social norms, highlighting their arbitrary character, processes of linguistic standardization and codification (e.g., through grammar books, dictionaries, and language policies) often create norms which are treated as absolute within a prescriptive framework. As a result, deviations from prescriptive use are sanctioned as "errors." In this context, it is important to highlight that language is not just an arbitrary system of communication, but a fundamental component of social structure and organization. The language norms that characterize a given speech community do not exist in a vacuum, but rather are shaped by social relationships and cultural values that are constantly (re)produced through conventional linguistic practices.

The (re)production of such historically contingent, yet ultimately arbitrary social norms through linguistic practices is an example of the performative potential of language, which has garnered greater attention with the pragmatic turn in linguistics, ushered by Speech Act Theory (SAT; Austin 1962; Searle 1969). SAT posits that speech acts consist not only of the locutionary act, but also include an illocutionary act (the intention behind the utterance) and a perlocutionary act (its effect). Hence, speaking is also acting.

Drawing inspiration from SAT and the concept of performativity, Butler (1993, 1999, 2004) posits that gender is also performative, highlighting that it "is real only to the extent that it is performed" (Butler 1988: 527). As such, gender is not something we are but rather something we do. Moreover, Butler pinpoints the repetitive character of such performative acts. It is through the recurrence of performative acts that a specific performance can become ritualized within a given society (cf. Butler 1993: 10). For example, specific dress codes can be used to perform gender categories according to the set of rules and norms within a specific society and the zeitgeist, but these are not universal and everlasting; the categories and the ways they are performed can vary across communities and change over time. The dynamic nature of gender categories and the way they are actively produced via social interaction has already been described several decades ago in ethnomethodology (cf. Garfinkel 1967; West & Zimmerman 1987). The use of linguistic resources plays an important role here, as they can bring about and perpetuate such differences.

In this thematic issue, we explore how linguistic practices serve as essential tools for the performative production of social categories, with a special focus on gender. Drawing on different theoretical frameworks and examples from case studies of various speech communities and social realms, the contributions examine how gender is constructed through iterative speech acts, establishing some of these constructions as the norm, while identifying (and often devaluating) others as deviations. In this exploration, we concentrate on three distinct manifestations of the performative potential of language practices:

1. **Language structure** (understood here as the sedimentation of ongoing linguistic practices), particularly examining the intersection between grammatical gender and social gender categories;
2. **Indexicalities**, i.e. the notion that the use of specific linguistic forms or codes by individuals or groups are socially interpretable

by members of speech communities and/or communities of practice, serving as indices for membership in a social category; and

3. **Discourse**, understood as a societal arena in which socially significant categories are constructed, communicated, and perpetuated.

Language structure, as an abstraction of the conventions underlying language use, is often the first topic that comes to mind when reflecting on the relationship between language, norms, and gender. In German and Romance-speaking societies, debates on language structure and gender have predominantly centered around the question of whether a direct connection between grammatical and social gender exists (cf. Zapf 2024). Central to these debates is the so-called "masculine generic," a topic that has sparked considerable controversy. The term "masculine generic" describes a linguistic practice according to which masculine forms (such as pronouns and nouns referring to human beings) are used to refer to men, women, and other genders collectively or in generic contexts. This practice assumes that the masculine form is neutral and inclusive of all genders.

However, the alleged "neutral" nature of the masculine generic has raised several concerns and criticisms, leading to advocacy for so-called "gender-inclusive" forms. In metalinguistic debates, the use of masculine forms when referring to mixed-gender groups is still often portrayed as a grammatical norm, while gender-inclusive alternatives are presented as deviations, and thus deemed incorrect (cf., e.g., Becker 2019; Müller-Spitzer 2021; Zapf 2024: 23–29). In a notable and particularly emblematic performative act, the Bavarian authorities recently reinforced the perceived "incorrectness" of certain gender-inclusive forms by legally prohibiting their use in certain contexts, arguing they do not conform to German orthographic norms. The argument that gender-inclusive forms are incorrect is frequently supported by framing language evolution as a "natural" process, dismissing seemingly "artificial" interventions to language use as illegitimate deviations from (perceived) language norms.

Against this backdrop, Müller-Spitzer and Ochs argue in their contribution "Shifting social norms as a driving force for linguistic change: Struggles about language and gender in the German Bundestag" that shifting social norms are a frequent source for language change. They exemplify this by analyzing debates about designations for gays and lesbians, about naming practices for women, and about gender-inclusive language in the German Bundestag. Their analysis shows that concerns about language and gender have repeatedly been discussed in the Bundestag since the 1980s, and that such debates have influenced linguistic practices in the Bundestag plenaries. Hence, interventions to language use are neither unusual nor inappropriate.

Questions of language use beyond the masculine generic also extend to translation studies, for instance concerning the question of how to promote the use of gender-inclusive language forms in machine translation (cf., e.g., Piergentili et al. 2024). Chagas, Hilß, and Müller's study "Neural machine translation and a queer perspective on gender bias – A qualitative study of how different strategies of *écriture inclusive* are translated into German by Google Translate and DeepL" approaches the question of whether neural machine translations (NMT) provide translations which go beyond a binary gender distinction. The authors examine how NMT (Google Translate and DeepL) handles the translation of French-to-German sentences in which

gender-inclusive strategies are used. The study reveals the prevalence of gender bias in translations generated by NMT systems. Although NMT does in some cases produce translations which use gender-inclusive strategies, they always encompass a binary gender distinction. Furthermore, masculine forms are typically favored as the default, regardless of the gender-inclusive strategy used in the source language. Translations are further influenced by gender stereotypes, particularly regarding prestigious professional and academic titles. As such, genderqueer individuals are notably excluded in the translations produced by NMT. Moreover, the technical challenges of translating gendered language, such as the use of specific characters like the point symbol for gender diversity, affect translation quality. The results are not surprising since this technology relies on corpora and algorithms that emerge from a society that still debates on linguistic practices regarding gender-inclusive strategies. In this vein, the article argues that without ethical frameworks for AI and data training sets, machine translation systems will continue to reinforce gender biases and representational harms.

Beyond gendered grammatical forms, speakers can deliberately use linguistic elements as a semiotic resource to perform gender and other social categories due to their **social indexical meaning**. They can strategically employ features associated with a particular group to express affiliation with and/or create distance from specific social categories. For example, individuals may adopt specific speech patterns to index their gender or sexual orientation (cf., e.g., Cameron & Kulick 2003; Motschenbacher 2007), leveraging socially shared associations between linguistic features and group membership. Thus, by using linguistic features commonly associated with, for example, femaleness or homosexuality, individuals can construct and perpetuate social differences between women and men, homosexuals and heterosexuals, and so forth.

In these processes, individuals often identify with a specific group – the ingroup – and categorize those they do not perceive as belonging to "their" group as an outgroup. The ingroup tends to be treated as the norm, while the outgroup is perceived and presented as a deviation from this norm. Such processes are often reflected in language use and further marginalize those perceived as members of the outgroup – for example when trans people are denied the use of their preferred pronouns, or when the existence of more than two genders is rejected by refusing the use of all-gender-inclusive forms. In the context of linguistic research on social discrimination, it is particularly illuminating to explore how linguistic resources are employed to construct social groups, to set them apart from one another and/or to evaluate them, establishing hierarchies between linguistic forms and the groups that they index.

Taking the multilingual society of Macau as a case example, Dohardt's contribution "Gender and language use in Macau, 16th – 19th century." illustrates how gender roles can shape linguistic repertoires both on an individual and a societal level, producing indexicalities with long-reaching historical consequences. Analyzing different kinds of metalinguistic data in Portuguese and Macanese Creole (also referred to as 'Maquista') within a historically informed discourse framework, Dohardt shows how gender regimes in colonial Macau, together with social barriers based on ethnicity, regulated access to the social spaces where the Portuguese prestige norm was used, excluding women from acquiring normative Portuguese. This explains

why the formation and transmission of Macanese Creole is historically tied to female identities and, given the hierarchical relationships between gender roles, subordinate social positions. With the democratization of education, the traditionally gendered pattern of bilingualism became obsolete, leading to the amplification of all genders' linguistic repertoires to include Sinitic languages and English, in addition to Portuguese. This happened at the expense of Maquista, which over the centuries had become associated with low prestige and social marginalization. However, a positive reinterpretation of Maquista as an identity marker can still be observed at present, especially in the performance arts, where Macanese still thrives.

Hence, outgroups are not always passively defined as "deviations" by hegemonic outsiders. Some take pride in their outsider status, deliberately marking it through their language practices. One aspect that differentiates LGBTQIA+ linguistic practices from mainstream norms is the use of specific linguistic features, such as the glottal stop in speech or the asterisk in writing in German, to denote non-binary and fluid gender identities. Unlike the generic use of the masculine form, which is prevalent in many languages, LGBTQIA+ dialects often incorporate gender-neutral language or alternative pronouns to affirm the diverse spectrum of gender identities present within the community. This departure from the norm challenges traditional linguistic conventions, highlighting the importance of the explicit linguistic representations of LGBTQIA+ individuals and identities. In these instances, the respective linguistic features are often perceived as deviating from conventional ways of speaking, hence by using them speakers also position themselves as a deviation from a (linguistic and social) norm.

Alves Vieira studies one of these "unconventional" linguistic practices in his contribution "*Graças a Deusa* – (Social) media uses of Pajubá, the Brazilian LGBTQIA+ dialect." Alves Vieira's sociolinguistic study approaches the attitudes of Brazilian Portuguese native speakers toward Pajubá, which originated in the temples of Candomblé and then, despite prejudices, oppression, and stigmatization, flourished within the Afro-Brazilian community as well as the queer speech community, and later also in non-queer circles. The study reveals various functions of Pajubá on social media, including fostering a sense of belonging, facilitating dialogue between queer and non-queer communities, and conveying humor, coolness, and trendiness. Despite some negative perceptions, such as commercialization and appropriation, most respondents expressed positive attitudes towards its use in online communication. The largely positive attitudes towards the use of Pajubá on social media show that this dialect is spreading more and more in the virtual world which could influence less gender-queered ways of speaking Brazilian Portuguese.

On a more referential level, gender differences are also constructed in **discourse**, when speaking about men, women, and other genders. This is especially evident when it comes to gender stereotypes. Various studies have shown that men and women are presented in a stereotypical manner in the media, in advertisements, dictionaries, proverbs, and so on (cf., among many others, Bühlmann 2002; Motschenbacher 2006; Eichhoff-Cyrus 2009; Fernández Poncela 2011; Burel 2017; Charlesworth et al. 2021; Müller-Spitzer & Lobin 2022). Such discourses simultaneously produce and perpetuate perceived gender differences, often intertwining them with other dimensions of social difference such

as sexual orientation, race, and religion. This underscores the importance of intersectional frameworks in research on these processes.

In this sense, Jansen's contribution "*Simplemente te casas con un alemán y ya tienes tu residencia*: Verbal violence, interactive positioning, and the stereotype of the opportunistic marriage migrant in Latin American migration contexts in Germany" explores the intersection between gender and ethnicity. Migrant women are often in particularly powerless positions, making them more vulnerable to various forms of violence. Jansen explores the role of stereotypes in the emergence of verbal violence at the intersection of gender and ethnic stereotypes. Her analysis is based on selected examples from the VIOLIN corpus, which consists of narratives collected from Spanish-speaking migrants in Germany who recount interactions with members of German society that left them hurt, angry, or otherwise negatively affected. Focusing on the example of the "opportunistic marriage migrant," which portrays women from economically disadvantaged countries as cold-hearted opportunists who use German men to achieve citizenship and economic wealth, she shows that stereotypes play an essential role in the emergence of verbal violence. Departing from the assumption of Positioning Theory, which posits that communication involves assigning social positions to interlocutors that are often "enregistered" in the collective social imaginary of a speech community, Jansen analyzes two examples in which speech acts categorize migrants as marriage scammers, posing a significant threat to their self-perceived social identity, which leads to the perception of the speech act as an instance of verbal violence. Nevertheless, the very same migrants who are negatively affected by such positioning acts also reaffirm the stereotype in their narratives, using it as a counterpoint against which they construct their own identities as independent and sincere women.

While the narratives analyzed by Jansen represent individual discourse excerpts where overarching discourse patterns manifest on a personal scale, proverbs encapsulate centuries-long beliefs and convictions in a condensed textual form. In her article "Gender stereotypes and social normativity: Insights from the Great Chain of Being metaphor in proverbs," Lomotey analyzes gender stereotypes and ideologies in Spanish proverbs. She argues that proverbs not only reflect shared knowledge or attitudes of a speech community but can also inform the behavior of its speakers, which is why it is important to unravel the gender ideologies they convey. Using the Great Chain Metaphor Theory (Lakoff/Turner 1989), Ambivalent Sexism Theory (Glick/Fiske 1997), and the Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (Lazar 2007) as analytical approaches, she finds that some stereotypes openly convey hostile sexism (e.g., the belief that women must be obedient to men), while others reflect rather benevolent sexism (e.g., the idea that women are weaker than men and must therefore be protected). She concludes that proverbs about women and men can have powerful effects because they can reinforce notions of normative male and female behavior.

Besides personal narratives, public debates, for example within political institutions, are an important arena where gender categories and relations are constructed. In her article "*...celles qui ne rêvent que d'une chose: être libérées et s'affranchir du voile...* Unravelling the discursive dynamics of sign making in the French Senate's debates on the hijab and the burkini," Zapf examines debates in the French Senate that deal with legislation on wearing a hijab or a burkini. These garments are a

recurring topic in many countries with immigration from Muslim-majority countries. Drawing from Gal & Irvine's (2019) theoretical framework on sign making, Zapf analyzes how they came to be recognized as socially meaningful signs and what this means for images of "the Muslim woman" constructed in such debates. The analysis reveals that the hijab and the burkini are constructed as indices for the Islamic religion, for a specific politico-religious ideology, and as an instrument to impose this ideology. Hence, these signs are depicted as a threat to French society. From this, two images of hijab/burkini-wearing women are constructed: "the passive victim" as well as "the militant extremist." The author argues that these images can only be explained when considering both the gender and the religious dimension, which shows the necessity of an intersectional approach when studying how Muslim women are othered.

With its focus on gendered language structure and related metalinguistic discourse, social indexicalities tied to gender identities, as well as gender-related discourses, this special issue addresses just three realms of study that can be crucial for gaining deeper insights into how norms and deviations from norms are used to construct social groups and position them as "normal" or "abnormal." Much remains to be explored regarding how language practices not only contribute to the formation and perpetuation of social groups, but also to the marginalization and discrimination of individuals who, for various reasons, do not conform to expected norms. If this volume has contributed in even a small way to deconstruct notions of "normal" linguistic and social behavior, thereby promoting a more inclusive society on different levels, the editors would be exceptionally pleased.

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