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**LANGUAGE AND PREJUDICE: REPORT FROM A SOCIOLINGUISTIC  
CONFERENCE (ÖREBRO, SWEDEN, 13–15 NOVEMBER 2019)**

Key words: sociolinguistics, language prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping, gender.

**ABSTRACT**

This detailed report concerns a conference on language and prejudice, held at the Örebro University in November 2019. Summaries of the keynote lectures and talks given by participants from Europe and beyond have been complemented by excerpts from their works to provide a better understanding of some recent accomplishments in the field.

Most conference organisers know how hard it is to choose a good conference theme – encompassing yet concise, fresh yet on-brand, meaningful yet memorable. However, the organisers of the conference *Language and Prejudice*, which took place in Örebro, Sweden, in November last year, succeeded in this task. The well-designed focus of their symposium brought together educators and activists from many countries (Finland, France, Germany, India, Kuwait, Poland, Russia, Sweden, United Kingdom, United States of America) and allowed them to discuss up-to-date issues such as language discrimination and bias, language policies, diversity and stereotyping.

**LANGUAGE POLICIES**

The first day of the conference was devoted to two keynote lectures (by Tamara Rakić and Cheryl Glenn) and two parallel sessions on language policies and the intersection of language and gender. In the first one, entitled *Say it with an accent: The role of language and accents in social perception*, Tamara Rakić from the Lancaster University demonstrated how accents, which are predominant cues for social categorisation, can blind us. Describing the who-said-what experiment of Shelley Taylor and colleagues (1978), its more refined version, modified by Karl Christoph Klauer and Ingo Wegener (1998), and some of her own findings (Hansen, Rakić and Steffens 2017; Rakić, Steffens and

Mummendey 2011a, 2011b), she reaffirmed the famous quote by Jean-Jacques Rousseau: “L’accent est l’âme du discours; il lui donne le sentiment et la vérité.” The keynote lecture was complemented by Dozie Ugbaja with a talk in which she proved that international learners of English as a foreign language show accent bias, strengthened by teaching and testing systems. Worse still, this prejudice can be observed even when intelligibility is achieved (that is, when a teacher’s message is understood by a student).

Language policies were further discussed by Mats Landqvist, who studied language innovations recommended by LGBTQ, anti-racist and disability organisations in Sweden in order to include “groups that have previously been named in derogatory ways or not at all” (2019), Gregor Kweik, who focused on national minority laws in Sweden, and Gaillynn Clements. In an introductory note, she admitted:

I’m a linguadork – I embrace it; I revel in this side of myself. I enjoy language: the breath, the formation, the sound, the art, the word on the page. Even more, I relish studying how and why people (myself included) use language, how we manipulate it and how we are manipulated by it.

This affection could be clearly seen throughout her talk regarding many forms of linguistic discrimination on university campuses. Clements appreciated the efforts American universities make to embrace people of different social, religious, racial, ethnic and sexual identities and backgrounds, although, in her view, there is still much room for improvement with regard to language prejudice. According to her research, both students and instructors or professors “participate in and are the objects of language and dialect discrimination due to differences in speech along the lines of gender, social class, level of education, ethnicity, race and religion.” In the closing remarks, Clements shared some useful tips on how to promote linguistic diversity in everyday academic life.

#### LANGUAGE AND GENDER

The convoluted relationship between language and gender formed the central focus for several other speakers. Cheryl Glenn from the Pennsylvania State University completed the first part of the day with a powerful and poetic lecture on what she calls “rhetorical feminism” (2018). In her talk, Glenn addressed the global shift towards unjust systems and claimed that rhetorical tools can be employed to challenge them and “(re)invent ourselves as engaged citizens”. Afterwards, drawing from numerous studies (Chejnová 2015; Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1996; Boneva, Kraut and Frohlich 2001), Fatemah Alsaffar illuminated the subject with a talk on politeness strategies used by male and female Arab students in e-mail requests to their professors. This thread was then picked up by Daniel Sunderland. In his report, Sunderland criticised methods used by Emily Martin (1991) to analyse the image of the egg and the sperm in textbooks but, eventually, supported her conclusion: stereotypes about men and women are, indeed, transcribed onto their reproductive cells.

The next day commenced with the last keynote lecture, delivered by Jane Sunderland, and three more presentations. Océane Foubert concentrated on English gendered

neologisms, such as *guyliner*, *man science* and *mansplaining*, and identified three motivations for coining them: respectively, “appropriation of domains which are stereotypically associated with a different group of people; reinforcement of differences; naming of undesirable male and/or heterosexual behaviours, rendering them more visible” in an attempt to battle them (Foubert and Lemmens 2017, 1). In another large-scale corpus study, Maarten Lemmens found that men are more likely to be labelled as naturally intelligent than women, which is reflected in the gender-conditioned use of adjectives (a man can be *brilliant* or *gifted*, whereas a woman has to be *studious* or *diligent*). Finally, Mattias Lindvall-Östling presented selected results of RAVE and C-RAVE projects. A matched-guise experiment, conducted by his research team in Sweden and the Seychelles with the use of voice-changing software, confirmed that “listeners react differently to a speaker and what is being said depending on the perceived identity of the speaker” (Lindvall-Östling, Deutschmann and Steinvall 2019, 209) and provoked reflection on the cross-cultural impact of gender on conversation behaviour. The same projects, but from a slightly different angle, were simultaneously discussed by Mats Deutschmann and Anders Steinvall in a parallel session and by Satish Patel the next day.

In a brilliant lecture, Jane Sunderland first provided some much-needed clarification of how prejudice, language and gender should be defined. Clear adhesive tape for girls – one of many “pointlessly gendered products” – served as an example of how gender “carries biological difference into domains in which it is completely irrelevant” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2013, 2). Next, Sunderland highlighted sexist undertones of the English language and discourse (the latter in a case study of Boris Johnson’s derogatory comments) and warned about something that we should all beware of – that it is “a mistake to assume that people simply ‘are’ or ‘are not’ prejudiced. As a speaker, someone can construct themselves (perform) being one or the other – depending on the context, their goal in that context and who the interlocutors are.”

#### MULTILINGUALISM

Thanks to the organisers’ concern for diversity, many non-European cultures were debated over the three days. The most attention was given to India, with its unparalleled variety of languages (1,652 mother tongues, 22 languages recognised in the constitution, four major language families). Ayan Ghosh elaborated on the controversies regarding the status of Hindi and English as the official languages of the republic and the urgency to halt the ongoing monolingualisation which threatens all the minority languages. The very same issue was then tackled by Sujit Malick, who decided to look at it from a social viewpoint, not a political one, proving that Hindi and Bengali dehumanise the Shudra (the lowest rank of the four *varnas* in India’s caste system). Subsequently, Usha Nair faced a dilemma spelt out by Robin Lakoff: “Does one correct a social inequity by changing linguistic disparities?” (1973, 46). Her talk provided valuable insight into women leaders in India, the social constraint they are subjected to and its impact on how

they communicate (asking for help, delegating tasks, giving and receiving compliments or criticism, talking about achievements).

Uruguay – specifically, Montevideo and the small city of Rocha in the south-east of the country – attracted Lotta Christiansen and inspired her compelling study on language mindsets and identities of inhabitants of these two cities. Taiwan and China consumed the attention of Chun-Yi Peng. Drawing from his recent study (2018), he attempted to grasp an elusive change of attitude towards Taiwan Mandarin among Chinese mainlanders, which he associated with China’s rise as a world power and “the shifting models of cosmopolitanism and masculinity”, resulting in a rapid gain of social prestige by Beijing Mandarin. Some consideration was given to Russia, too, when Vlada Baranova painted the linguistic landscape of one of the most multilingual cities of the federation (namely, Saint Petersburg) using data collected through LinguaSnapp – a mobile crowdsourcing app.

Apart from the aforementioned issues, the extensive programme of the conference included talks on collocates of the words *prejudice* and *discrimination* in British newspapers (Laura Paterson), the status of different languages in use in the Swedish labour market (Carla Jonsson), values and attitudes towards second language education shared by Danish, Swedish and Norwegian language teachers (Helge Råihä and Christina von Post) and the development and effectiveness of an intervention programme aimed at reducing prejudice in primary school students (Viivi Mäkinen and Karmela Liebkind). After three days of deliberations, the organisers acknowledged:

Our original goal was to find presenters who could talk about gender and ethnicity, but we ended up with much more: a diverse collection of thoughtful and critical topics that covered education, the workplace, media, legislation and technology.

Not only out of conventional academic courtesy one has to concur with that statement. Moreover, they managed to create a welcoming environment in which networking was not a strenuous duty but a pleasure. A forthcoming volume of *Open Linguistics*, consisting of conference proceedings, edited by Mats Deutschmann and Charish Halliburton, is surely going to reflect that.

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**Język i uprzedzenie. Sprawozdanie z konferencji socjolingwistycznej (Örebro, Szwecja, 13–15 listopada 2019 roku)**

Słowa kluczowe: socjolingwistyka, uprzedzenia językowe, dyskryminacja, stereotypizacja, płęć społeczno-kulturowa.

**STRESZCZENIE**

Sprawozdanie dotyczy konferencji o języku i uprzedzeniach, zorganizowanej przez Uniwersytet w Örebro w listopadzie 2019 roku. Streszczenia wykładów przewodnich oraz referatów wygłoszonych przez uczestniczki i uczestników z Europy i świata dopełnione zostały omówieniami ich prac, by lepiej uchwycić charakter najnowszych osiągnięć w subdyscyplinie.