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Identifying discourse patterns in social media comments on “politically correct” language

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Abstract: This paper presents an analysis of online comments on German newspaper articles dealing with non-discriminating language use. Combining bottom-up quantitative methods with qualitative analyses allows for identifying recurrent discourse patterns as well as typical narratives that play a role in this debate. I argue that if a major goal of critical cognitive linguistics is to reach out to the general public, understanding the appeal of such narratives (which are, obviously, often factually wrong) is just as important as identifying and refuting them.

Keywords:

1 Introduction

Two recent tendencies in cognitive linguistics are a) the use of ever more sophisticated empirical methods to describe language from a usage-based point of view in a bottom-up way and b) an increasingly interdisciplinary outlook. In this paper, I argue that critical cognitive linguistics can benefit from both tendencies in the endeavor to understand how linguistic usage patterns shape public discourse and how, ultimately, language constitutes social relations (Hart 2014). As a case study, I present an analysis of online comments on German newspaper articles connected to the topic of politically correct language use¹ in general and about gender-inclusive language in particular. This debate can be considered a prime example of public discourse about language, as it is connected to highly sensitive and emotional topics such as the question of how language constitutes and perpetuates social identities as well as stereotypes. As shown by e.g.

¹ I follow e.g. Stefanowitsch (2018) in using “politically correct” as a neutral term even though it has a problematic history: As Lakoff (2000: 90) points out, “it served as the weapon of choice to defang what was perceived, or represented, by the right as the threatening menace of the left.”

Hartmann & Sties (2018), analyzing online comments on newspaper platforms can help identify recurrent discourse patterns and narratives that underlie the main lines of argument. The aim of the present paper is to identify some of the key discourse patterns that can be found in the public discussion about politically correct language based on a set of online comments (Section 2) and to discuss how they relate to common language ideologies in a broader sense and how a critical cognitive linguistics can approach them (Section 3).

2 Case study: Online comments

This section presents a case study investigating online comments on newspaper articles dealing with politically correct language use. Section 2.1 presents the data collected for this study, Section 2.2 introduces the methods that are used in order to gauge discourse patterns in a bottom-up, usage-driven way. Section 2.3 presents the results.

2.1 Data

For the present exploratory case study, a rather opportunistic data sample of comments on online magazine articles was taken from 16 manually selected sources. The articles address three different topics:

(i) In February 2018, the German Federal Court of Justice (Bundesgerichtshof) rejected an appeal by feminist activist Marlies Krämer, who had sued her bank for addressing all their clients, regardless of gender, with the male form *Kunde* ‘client’ instead of the female form *Kundin* in their forms.² The generic use of masculine forms is a hotly-debated topic in German. From a linguistic point of view, there is abundant evidence that masculine forms are not understood in a “generic”, gender-neutral sense (see Kotthoff & Nübling 2018: 91–127 for an overview). In their verdict, the judges acknowledged that the generic form might not be understood in a gender-neutral way but argued that the generic masculine was still in general use. Both the court case itself and the verdict were discussed quite controversially in the media. Due to its extensive media coverage, the vast majority of the data analyzed for the present paper refers to this first topic.

(ii) and (iii) The years 2017 and 2018 also saw the publication of two books published by Duden, the publishing house that is best known for their orthographies and

² The text of the verdict can be found here: <http://juris.bundesgerichtshof.de/cgi-bin/rechtsprechung/document.py?Gericht=bgh&Art=en&nr=82652&pos=0&anz=1> (last accessed 23/03/2020).

grammar books of the German language. One, Diewald & Steinhauer (2017), is a guide-book on gender-neutral language use, the other, Stefanowitsch (2018), is an essay that argues for the use of politically correct language. Both books were written by linguists for a general audience, and both were discussed controversially in the media. The remaining data analyzed for the case are comments on articles that summarize and/or discuss these books.

Following the approach taken by Hartmann & Sties (2017), the online magazines from which the comments are drawn were selected in such a way that they reflect the (political) breadth of the German landscape of newspapers and online magazines, from the more left-wing “taz” to the heavily right-leaning web magazine “Tichys Einblick”. The data were extracted with the help of custom crawlers from the individual webpages. As one of the newspapers (*Süddeutsche Zeitung/SZ*) has entirely relegated its comments section to a Facebook page, the comments on the article in question were (semi-)manually extracted from facebook.com/ihre-sz. The number of comments per article varies between 3 and 650. As the quantitative studies reported on below require fairly large datasets, data from Reddit was taken into account in addition. As the Reddit comments all discuss individual newspaper and magazine articles, they can be assumed to be very similar to the other comments in all important respects. The Reddit data comprise 1288 comments. Altogether, 3665 comments were taken into account. Table 1 in Appendix A lists the data sources, Appendix B gives an overview of the articles that the Reddit comments refer to.³

2.2 Method

The data were analyzed using two different exploratory methods. It should be stressed at the outset that both are exclusively used to guide the qualitative analysis of the data. The first is Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA, Blei et al. 2003), a data-driven modelling technique that aims at uncovering thematic similarities between texts (Bildhauer & Schäfer 2016: 336). In addition, following Bubenhofer (2009), simple n-gram analyses are used. Both methods can be seen as complementing each other: While LDA seeks to uncover “the ‘hidden’ thematic structure of a given collection of texts” (Maier et al. 2018: 93), n-gram analyses can help us to detect surface phenomena, e.g. recurrent phrasings that can ideally be mapped to the underlying topics that have been identified with the help of LDA.

³ It should be noted that the platforms taken into account differ significantly in the degree to which the comments are moderated. But arguably this does not make too much a difference for the reconstruction of discourse patterns: Especially when it comes to uncovering e.g. prejudice and stereotypes, subtle and indirect framings can be much more interesting and relevant as they are much harder to detect.

Let us briefly take a closer look at both methods. LDA treats each text in a given corpus as a “document” and each unigram in each text as a “term”. Based on the distribution of terms across documents, sets of words are grouped together (Maier et al. 2018: 94f.). A (latent) topic, then, is “characterized by a distribution over words.” (Blei et al. 2003: 996) One problematic aspect is that in the case at hand, the “documents”, i.e. the individual comments, are relatively short in most cases. The shortest comments are one-word utterances ($n = 104$), the longest comment has 537 words, with a mean of 47 and a median of 29 words. However, the results reported on below suggest that even on the basis of such relatively small documents, LDA yields interesting results that can serve as a starting point for a more detailed qualitative analysis. The LDA analysis was performed using the package *topicmodels* (Grün & Hornik 2011) for R (R Core Team 2019).

For the n -gram analysis, all trigrams were extracted from the corpus and then compared to a reference dataset with the help of the Log-Likelihood association measure. As Manning & Schütze (1999: 193) point out, bigrams, trigrams, and four-grams are the most typically-used n -gram types used in Natural Language Processing. Trigrams are arguably particularly well-suited as a pointer towards recurrent formulaic patterns. A random sample of 50,000 trigrams from the webcorpus DECOW (Schäfer & Bildhauer 2012) was used as the reference dataset. The R package *collostructions* (Flach 2017), originally conceived for performing collostructional analyses (e.g. Stefanowitsch & Gries 2003), was used for computing the association measures. The choice of DECOW as a reference corpus is motivated by the consideration that as a text type, online comments can be placed on a continuum between standard written language and more non-standard varieties of computer-mediated communication. DECOW reflects the entire spectrum of this continuum, which is why it seems better-suited for this purpose than typical reference corpora of written language.

2.3 Results

2.3.1 LDA

We will first take a look at the LDA results. The LDA algorithm relies on various parameters that have to be specified in advance. For the present study, the default prior parameters suggested by Griffiths & Steyvers (2004) are used, which are also implemented as defaults into the *topicmodels* R package. Frequent function words were removed using the stopwords list implemented in the *tm* package (Feinerer et al. 2008).

There is no agreed-upon decision procedure for choosing the “right” number of topics. Given the fairly small amount of data, working with too many topics would not make sense in the context of the present study. Instead, models with 2 to 9 topics were

computed and compared. Figure 1 shows one model with four topics (left) and one model with nine topics (right).

Figure 1: LDA results for the four-topic solution (left) and the nine-topic solution (right).

The identified topics are fairly similar across the different models, and they can be seen as reflecting recurrent patterns of argumentation in the discourse about politically correct language in general and gender-neutral language in particular. For instance, Topic 1 in the left panel of Figure 1 and Topic 6 in the right-hand panel can be connected with the recurrent pattern that the problems at stage are relativized, or not acknowledged in the first place, containing words like *eigentlich* ‘actual(ly)’ and *problem(e)* ‘problem(s)’ cf. (1).

- (1) Eigentlich kann es sich bei solchen Mitmenschen nur um Zeitgenossen handeln, die den Blick auf wahre Probleme und Herausforderungen aus den Augen verloren haben ‘Actually such fellow people can only be contemporaries who have lost the sense for true problems and challenges.’ (privatbahn, Spiegel)

The question of whether women feel addressed when the “generic” masculine form is used is debated controversially in the comments, and it is reflected in Topic 2 of the four-topic model, which contains terms like *angesprochen* ‘addressed’, *fühlen* ‘feel’, *diskriminiert* ‘discriminated (against)’. One excerpt arguing in favor of gender-neutral language is cited in (2). In the nine-topic model, this aspect is reflected in several topics, e.g. in Topic 8.

- (2) Naja, dass Studien zeigen, dass sich viele Frauen bei dem generischen Maskulinum einfach nicht angesprochen fühlen, ist ja auch nicht erst jetzt neu sondern schon länger bekannt. ‘Well, the fact that studies show that many women don’t feel addressed by the generic masculine form is not exactly new but has been known for a while.’ (somedifferentguy, Reddit)

The relation between language and thought is also frequently discussed in the comments, as both Topic 3 of the left-hand panel and Topic 3 of the right-hand panel show, containing words like *sprache* ‘language’, *denken* ‘thought’, and *gesellschaft* ‘society’.

- (3) Man muss sich halt eben bewusst machen, dass es eine Verbindung zwischen Sprache und Denken, Gesellschaft, Kultur, etc. gibt. ‘One has to realize that there is a connection between language and thought, society, culture, etc.’ (somedifferentguy, Reddit)
- (4) Gutes Sprechen macht gutes Denken, flaches Sprechen macht flaches Denken. Gute Ausdrucksweise ist ein Ausdruck von Bildung. ‘Good speaking makes good thinking, shallow speaking makes shallow thinking. Good parlance is an expression of education.’ (Freigeistiger, Spiegel)

An aspect that is not reflected in the four-topic solution is the frequent occurrence of direct addresses in the comments (see Topic 4 in the right-hand panel with e.g. *liebe* ‘dear’, *Frau* ‘woman/miss’). Sometimes they are used on a metalinguistic level to discuss the effect of gender-neutral language on address forms in letters as in (5), but quite often they are also used to address other discussants as in (6).

- (5) Man könnte ja mal testen, wie entspannt umgeehrt [sic] die deutschen Männer wären, wenn überall nur noch “Sehr geehrte Frau/**Liebe** Kundin/Arbeitnehmerin/ etc.” zu lesen wäre. ‘One could test how relaxed the German men would be, on the other hand, if you could only read ‘**Dear** ms./Dear customer-MOV/employee-MOV/ etc.’ everywhere’ (Thomas M., Spiegel)
- (6) **LiebeR** Frau Traude, haben sie noch andere Hobbys, als unter allen Kommentaren ihre Lästereien zu verzapfen? ‘**DeaR**⁴ Ms. Traude, do you have other hobbies than leaving your condescending remarks below all of the comments?’ (Markus H., SZ)

⁴ Word-internal capitals are often used in German to produce gender-inclusive forms, e.g. *KundInnen* ‘clients’. In the case of *liebe/r* ‘dear’, *lieber* would be the masculine form and *liebe* the feminine one. The form *liebeR* is of course used sarcastically here as the addressee clearly self-identifies as female.

If we compare the four-cluster solution and the nine-cluster solution, one interesting finding is that the topics in the latter include more discourse particles like *halt* (roughly comparable to English *just*), exemplified in (7), which is particularly interesting due to its semantic value that ranges from framing the proposition as obvious to framing it as the only possibility, e.g. in phrases like *das ist halt so* ‘that’s **just** the way it is’ (see Schoonjans 2018: 45). As Hentschel (1986: 261) points out, *halt* can be used to construe a proposition as an unalterable fact. Thus, the commentator in (7) frames their view that notions like *cis* are only taken seriously in a small left-oriented group as self-evident.

- (7) Wenn du in diesem Kontext unironisch mit Begriffen wie *cis* ankommst wunder dich **halt** nicht wenn du aus dem Raum gelacht wirst. ‘If you use notions like *cis* unironically in this context, **just** don’t be surprised when you’re laughed out of the room.’ (qqwertz, Reddit)

As stated above, the data analyzed here are a less-than-ideal input for LDA, which is why the identified clusters are not always meaningful: Especially in the case of the nine-topic solution, some of the topics only reflect a very small number of comments. But they can still prove useful as a guide to qualitative analysis in that they point to recurring discourse patterns, especially in combination with the n-gram analysis to which we now turn.

2.3.2 n-grams

As Bubenhofer (2009: 123f.) states, using n-grams offers the opportunity of detecting patterns in a corpus inductively, without delimiting the search a-priori by defining specific search terms. In doing so, we can identify multi-word units that occur with above-chance frequency, which in turn can guide the identification of discourse patterns via interpretation of the data (Bubenhofer 2009: 152–174). As mentioned in Section 2.2, the present study opts for the use of trigrams, and instead of using raw frequency counts, the frequency of the trigrams is compared to DECOW n-grams using the log-likelihood ratio G^2 as an association measure. For this analysis, all n-grams were converted to lowercase.

Figure 2 visualizes the results as a word cloud. The size of each trigram in Figure 2 represents its association strength – note, however, that the most strongly associated trigram *das generische maskulinum* ‘the generic masculine form’ is omitted to keep the remaining trigrams readable.

Figure 2: Trigrams that occur with above-chance frequency (compared to a reference dataset, see main text) in the online comments. Font size reflects association strength.

Taking a closer look at the associated trigrams, they can be grouped into quite revealing clusters. The three most strongly attracted trigrams, *das generische maskulinum*, *die weibliche form* ‘the feminine form’, and *die männliche form* ‘the masculine form’, reflect the main topics that are discussed in most of the comments. From a discourse-analytic perspective, however, the other trigrams that are not immediately connected to the content of the discussion are much more interesting as they point to recurring patterns of argumentation and rhetorical devices.

One aspect that becomes clear in many of the patterns is that the discourse participants negotiate what exactly is relevant for the discussion at hand. For instance, the construction *um etw. gehen* ‘to be about sth.’ (lit ‘go around sth.’) figures in trigrams like *es geht nicht* (lit. ‘it doesn’t go’) or *wenn es um* (lit. ‘if/when it around’). The discussant in (8), for example, argues vehemently that language is outside the scope of jurisdiction, and the commentator in (9) argues that facts and emotions tend to be conflated in the debate.

- (8) **Es geht nicht um** etwas Juristisches, sondern um etwas rein Sprachliches. Und da haben Gerichte ihren Rüssel raus zu halten. Gerichte sind nicht für die Sprache zuständig. Fertig, aus, Akte dicht. ‘**It’s not about** something legal but about something purely linguistic. And courts have to keep their trunk out of this. Courts are not concerned with language. Period, full stop, that’s it.’ (Josef G., Cicero)
- (9) Die Sprachsensibilität scheint bei vielen, auch Journalisten/innen, dann, **wenn es um** Sachdarstellungen, nicht um Befindlichkeiten **geht**, extrem unterentwickelt zu sein, weshalb, vermutlich, versucht wird alles zur Angelegenheit des "Anfühlers", Fühlens zu machen. ‘Sensitivity for language seems to be extremely underdeveloped in many people, including journalists, **when it comes to** the representation of facts rather than sensitivities, which is probably why it is attempted to make everything a matter of ‘feeling’, emotion.’ (Egolder, ZEIT)

This negotiation also plays a role in the construction *nichts mit etw. zu tun haben* ‘have nothing to do with sth.’, which surfaces in the trigram *nichts zu tun* ‘nothing to do’, as illustrated in (10). This trigram, however, also occurs in the construction *nichts zu tun haben* ‘have nothing to do’ as in (11), which is used to underline the alleged irrelevance of the topic, as already discussed in Section 2.3.1.

- (10) Nö, sie ist ein Kunde, das Wort ist geschlechtsneutral, der Artikel hat damit **nichts zu tun**. ‘Nope, she is a *Kunde* [client_{masc.}], the word is gender-neutral, the article has **nothing to do** with it.’ (Tywin, ZEIT)
- (11) Manche Leute haben einfach **nichts zu tun**. Oder vielleicht sind sie auch schlichtweg zu blöd. ‘Some people just have **nothing to do**. Or maybe they are simply too stupid.’ (Coyote, Freie Welt)

Another set of trigrams that can be linked to the linguistic aspects that lie at the heart of the debate, e.g. *die deutsche sprache* ‘the German language’, *der deutschen sprache* ‘the German language’, *in der sprache* ‘in the language’.

- (12) Das stimmt so nicht, weil Artikel **in der Deutschen Sprache** keinen wirklichen Zusammenhang mit dem Geschlecht besitzen, obwohl das gerne behauptet wird. ‘That’s not true because articles are not really connected to gender/sex **in the German language** even though this is sometimes claimed.’ (Selfie, ZEIT)
- (13) Nur mal ein Hinweis: **In der deutschen Sprache** gibt es, wie auch in den romanischen Sprachen, das generische Maskulinum. ‘Just a hint: **In the German language** there is, just like in the Romance languages, the generic masculine.’ (hkubin, Spiegel)

What the patterns discussed so far have in common is that they tend to occur in un-hedged declarative sentences, as the examples show. This can be seen as a rhetoric strategy that aims at framing the propositions as undisputed facts – similar to the use of the discourse particle *halt* discussed above. While *halt* does not occur in the associated trigrams, another discourse particle, *doch*, occurs in *es ist doch*, *ist es doch*, *es geht doch*. As Schoonjans (2019: 36–45) points out, *doch* marks a state of affairs as mutually known and true while also carrying an adversative nuance of meaning. For example, the commentator in (14), referring to the common practice at German universities to use the gender-neutral participial term *Studierende* ‘students’, uses *doch* to underline their position that this does not actually make a difference.

- (14) Meiner Erfahrung nach sagen die meisten eh noch Studenten. Und das ist auch vollkommen ok. Dass Unis stattdessen "Studierende" sagen interessiert eigentlich keine Sau (...). Es ist **doch** egal wenn wir mal ehrlich sind. ‘In my experience, most people say *Studenten* anyway. And that’s perfectly okay. Nobody cares that universities say *Studierende* instead. (...) It doesn’t matter, to be honest.’ (Alroghan, Reddit)

However, some of the trigrams also point to constructions that overtly mark stance and subjectivity, e.g. *in meinen Augen* ‘in my view’ or *von mir aus* ‘as far as I’m concerned’. In particular, these constructions are used to underline the perceived irrelevance of the topic.

- (15) **von mir aus** kann man mir Briefe mit Herr schicken (...). Lächerlicher Prozess. ‘**As far as I’m concerned**, one can send me letters [in which I am addressed as] Mister (...). Ridiculous process.’ (Katja J., SZ)
- (16) Sprache ist Ausdruck des Denkens und Empfindens (...). Was sie **in meinen Augen** absolut nicht sein darf, ist Mittel zur Volkserziehung! ‘Language is an expression of thought and feeling. (...) What it absolutely must not be **in my view** is a means for popular education!’ (Christa W., Cicero)

In sum, then, the n-gram analysis suggests that the discussants offer subjective views that are, however, rooted in considerations that are framed as objective, undisputed facts.

3 Discussion

The analyses presented above give clues to the common threads that dominate the (German) discussion about politically correct language in general and gender-neutral language in particular in Germany. Some of the recurring arguments identified above are based on misconceptions (such as the idea that there is no connection whatsoever between grammatical gender and socially constructed gender roles). Refuting such misconceptions is doubtlessly a major task for (cognitive) linguistics engaging in public discourse. However, it is also important to understand why these misconceptions are so pervasive. The analysis presented above can help answer this question by not only identifying some of the main narratives but also linking them to specific rhetoric strategies that are used to convey them.

From the perspective of critical cognitive linguistics, the results are interesting and relevant in various regards. As Bubenhofer (2017: 89) reminds us, data-driven methods can only provide a starting point to identifying underlying discourse patterns or argumentative “topoi”. Cognitive linguistics, which “comes up with its own explicitly theorised account of the relationship between language and conceptualisation” (Hart 2015: 323), provides a helpful terminological and conceptual toolkit to understand the underlying concepts. Given its focus on meaning, cognitive linguistics is well-suited for investigating the “negotiated meaning” that constitutes social reality (see e.g. Dirven et al. 2003: 3). Concepts like “frames” (Fillmore 2005), “idealized cognitive models” (Lakoff 1987), “image schemas” (Johnson 1987) or “mental spaces” (Fauconnier 1994) can help uncover patterns of thought that underlie a particular discourse. These patterns of thought can in turn motivate different linguistic construals (see Hart 2006: 114). In other words, the idea that language construes the world in specific ways based on inventories of shared conceptualizations and pre-assumptions is at the heart of cognitive linguistics. This invites a critical perspective: Firstly, those shared pre-assumptions themselves – whether we call them “frames”, “idealized cognitive models”, or “stereotypes” (see e.g. Konerding 2001) – can sometimes be problematic, and secondly, the power of linguistic construal can be used, consciously or unconsciously, in manipulative ways – a phenomenon that has been discussed extensively under the label of “framing” (see e.g. Matlock 2012). The case study reported on in Section 2 has shown how topics like the court trial about gender-inclusive language are framed in specific ways based on pre-assumptions that are worth unpacking in more detail:

First of all, it is important to take into account how language is usually conceived of in popular discourse. There is a widespread belief that takes “such items as *English* or *German* or *Dutch* to be things that exist in the real world as singular, clearly defined entities” (Langer & Davies 2005: 9). In addition, language is often seen as strongly connected to national identity. In the case of German, this tendency can be traced back

to a long and often problematic history of linguistic nationalism (see e.g. Stukenbrock 2005). As Gardt (1999: 318f.) points out, both tendencies often go in tandem. In the case at hand, some of the recurring discourse patterns can be attributed to this underlying model. Note that *deutsch* ‘German’ and *Deutschland* ‘Germany’ occur in many of the Topics in the nine-topic model in Figure 1 and that the trigrams *der deutschen sprache/die deutsche Sprache* ‘the German language’ are among the most strongly associated patterns in Figure 2. Of course, not all of these cases can be connected to linguistic nationalism, but still, many comments show that the commentators make a strong connection between the German language and what is perceived as Germany’s cultural identity, especially by referring to “‘famous’ individuals who are often named (...) as the creators or protectors of a particular standard language” (Langer & Davies 2005: 6f.), e.g. Goethe or Schiller, as in (17) and (18), or by referring to Germany as “land of poets and thinkers” as in (19).

- (17) Ein Göthe oder ein Schiller würden heute unter diesen Vorzeichen wohl keine Weltliteratur mehr schreiben (wollen). ‘A Goethe or Schiller probably wouldn’t (want to) write world literature under these circumstances.’ (Brathering, Spiegel Online)
- (18) Tschüss Goethe Schiller Lessing. Tschüss du deutsche Sprache. ‘Goodbye Goethe, Schiller, Lessing. Goodbye German language.’ (Peter J., SZ)
- (19) und das im Land der Dichter und Denker! Armes Deutschland!!! ‘... and all that in the country of poets and thinkers! Poor Germany!!!’ (Petro R., Tichys Einblick)

These construals of language can be seen as partly ideological, if we follow Hodge & Kress (1993: 3) in defining ideology as “a systematic body of ideas, organized from a particular point of view.” Importantly, this ideological construal is pervasive in virtually all discussions of language matters outside of academic linguistics, especially, however, in the way language is taught in (German) schools (see Müller 2019: 297–300). Arguments appealing to such “folk models” of language are therefore bound to be perceived as convincing by most non-experts.

However, while the link between language and culture is pervasive in the comments analyzed here, another interesting observation is that the connection between language and thought is frequently discussed as well. The arguments that appeal to the link between language and thought are quite heterogeneous, and many of the comments actually defend politically correct language based on linguistic findings about the way language shapes our construal of the world. In some cases, however, the same line of argument is used to reject politically correct language as a prescriptive norm forced upon language users by decree in order to manipulate the way they think, as in (20).

- (20) Es geht doch nicht um syntaktische und sprachästhetische Themen, sondern um den Einsatz von Sprachvorschriften als Mittel für Denkvorschriften. ‘It is not about syntactic or language-aesthetic topics but about the use of language regulations as a means for regulating thought.’ (Chris L., Cicero)

Note that this idea is a common narrative in discussions about politically correct language. In many cases, comparisons to Orwell’s “newspeak” are drawn (see Hartmann & Sties 2017), which is also a common theme in the comments analyzed here: *newspeak* or its German equivalent *Neusprech* are mentioned in 18 comments, Orwell in 10, and “1984” in 11.

The language-cognition-culture link as it is construed in the widespread idealized cognitive model arguably underlies much public discourse about language. It is of course fairly simplified, but for (cognitive) linguists engaging in public discourse, it might provide an interesting starting point: The link between language, cognition, and culture is a key topic in cognitive linguistics, and it is also a topic that sparks public interest on a regular basis. To mention just one example, research on linguistic relativity has been the topic of popular science books (e.g. Deutscher 2010). (Cognitive) linguists could capitalize on this widespread interest by explaining the complexity of the nexus between language, cognition, and culture to general audiences in accessible ways.

As Stefanowitsch (2019: 177) points out, linguists – including cognitive linguists and even proponents of frameworks like Critical Discourse Analysis – “have generally been hesitant to contribute to public debates about language”. One reason for this might be that in Academia, the communication of scientific results to general audiences has played only a marginal role for a long time. This situation is currently changing, and science communication is becoming ever more important. Engaging in public discourse can therefore be seen as an important part of a linguist’s everyday work. The increased appreciation of science communication is immediately tied to the recognition that science has a certain responsibility to raise awareness of scientific thinking and fact-based judgment not only in students but also in general audiences – a task that has become even more important with the rise of ideologically-motivated narratives in recent years. For linguists, this includes raising awareness for “language myths” and how they construe – and sometimes misconstrue – the relationship between language, culture, and identity. It also includes deconstructing potentially harmful ideologies that underlie public discourse about topics like gender or ethnicity. Stefanowitsch (2019: 195), while acknowledging that cognitive linguistics is compatible with a broad range of political views, also emphasizes that “cognitive linguistics is in many ways a fundamentally humanist discipline that is not compatible with ideologies that dehumanize and degrade individuals or groups of people”. One could go even further and say that it is an important task of linguistics to identify such ideologies and make language users aware of them – after all, they are often conveyed in very subtle ways. This is where the critical

perspective sets in, which is interested in “the role that language plays in creating and sustaining [...] social relations” (Hart 2016: 2).

As pointed out above, cognitive linguistics has developed a number of conceptual tools that can prove helpful in critically examining the ideological underpinnings of discourse(s). As cognitive linguists, we can show how dehumanizing or degrading ideologies as well as factually inaccurate pre-assumptions permeate much of the public discourse not only about culture and society, but also about language. In doing so, we can deconstruct false assumptions and popular myths emphatically, but also empathically: After all, it is important to keep in mind that many of the implicit assumptions underlying popular discourse about language are widely perceived as self-evident truisms, just as it is a self-evident truism to most professional linguists that they are obviously wrong. Keeping this in mind is a challenge not only for science communication but also for the way we as (critical, cognitive) linguists deal with popular debates about language in everyday discourse.

Data availability

The data analyzed for this paper are available at <https://osf.io/z86kh/>. For copyright and privacy reasons, only bag-of-word lists and n-grams are publicly available. The full data are available upon request.

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Appendix

A. Data sources

Table 1: List of data sources. The sites were crawled in July 2018, which is why some links probably won't work any more.

Source	Link	# of comments	topic
ntv	https://bit.ly/2zipq6M	8	Marlies Krämer
ihre.sz / Facebook	https://bit.ly/2znRNRc	650	Marlies Krämer

FR (1)	https://bit.ly/2KWluNC	12	Marlies Krämer
FR (2)	https://bit.ly/2u5FDr1	3	Marlies Krämer
tichyseinblick	https://bit.ly/2m6AZo9	72	Diewald & Steinhauer, "Richtig gendern"
Cicero	https://bit.ly/2KIrXNa	83	Anatol Stefanowitsch
Freie Welt	https://bit.ly/2N39EPw	20	Marlies Krämer
taz	http://www.taz.de/!5483021/	124	Marlies Krämer
FAZ	https://bit.ly/2u3Gvff	31	Marlies Krämer
Reddit	various (see below)	1288	various topics
Spiegel (1)	https://bit.ly/2N0T4zo	169	Marlies Krämer
Spiegel (2)	https://bit.ly/2KJyGpQ	62	Marlies Krämer
Spiegel (3)	https://bit.ly/2J6R5Y9	88	Talkshow (Maischberger) on PC
Cicero (2)	https://bit.ly/2KXksxM	120	PC language in general
Zeit (1)	https://bit.ly/2ziOhYs	525	Marlies Krämer
Zeit (2)	https://bit.ly/2JQibnu	410	Anatol Stefanowitsch

B. Reddit comments

- <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/leben/generisches-maskulinum-liebe-leser-das-folgende-interview-ist-auch-fuer-frauen-gedacht-1.3876211>

- https://www.kulturradio.de/programm/schema/sendungen/kulturradio_am_mittag/archiv/20180312_1205/tagesthema_1210.html
- <https://www.zeit.de/kultur/2018-05/politische-korrekttheit-sprache-diskriminierung-linguist-anatol-stefanowitsch/komplettansicht>
- <https://www.neues-deutschland.de/artikel/1073460.geschlecht-im-duden-richtig-gendern-will-gelernt-sein.html>
- <http://imgur.com/wCzqZUF>
- <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/gesellschaft/menschen/mehrheit-lehnt-geschlechtergerechte-sprache-ab-15193266.html>
- <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/angela-merkel-ist-zufrieden-mit-deutscher-nationalhymne-a-1196537.html>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AvlWovtH4hQ>
- http://diepresse.com/home/bildung/schule/3837996/Gendern_Feministinnen-zwingen-Mehrheit-ihren-Willen-auf
- https://www.reddit.com/r/Weibsvolk/comments/6zfeus/geschlechtergerechte_sprache_wie_seht_ihr_das/