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The recipient's sociocultural situation as a factor in understanding the author's intent

Over the past several decades, extensive evidence suggesting that efforts to eliminate sexist language are warranted was accumulated. This evidence included, among others, studies that showed that vocabulary reflexive of female stereotypes in letters of recommendation resulted in the rejection of women in spite of having the same qualifications as male applicants¹. Taken together, the vocabulary used by authors of work-related documentation explained why women's greater access to educational opportunities in previously male-dominated fields has, as Frances Trix and Carolyn Psenka put it, "not resulted in a commensurate movement of women into positions of power"² and how this, in consequence, decreased their motivation to apply for certain jobs.

Lexis that reinforces stereotypical gender schema was by no means the only linguistic category scholars decided to focus on. Considerable effort was also invested into determining if speaking a gendered, gender neutral or a genderless language translates into how women are treated on the job market or how it affects their level of education (which correlates with what kind of work they can do). The results obtained in this category were equally revealing, showing that as Astghik Mavisakalyan and Clas Weber put it, "grammatical gender is associated with gender inequalities at work

¹ GAUCHER D., FRIESEN J., KAY A., *Evidence That Gendered Wording in Job Advertisements Exists and Sustains Gender Inequality*, "Journal of Personality and Social Psychology", 2011, z. 101, nr 1, s. 109–128; LACROIX P. P., *Sex in Recs: Gender Bias in Recommendation Writing*, "Journal of College Admissions", 1985, z. 109, s. 24–26; MADERA J. M., HEBL M. R., MARTIN R. C., *Gender and Letters of Recommendation for Academia: Agentic and Communal Differences*, "Journal of Applied Psychology", 2009, z. 94, nr 6, s. 1591–1599; TRIX F., PSENKA C., *Exploring the Color of Glass: Letters of Recommendation for Female and Male Medical Faculty*, *Discourse and Society*, 2003, z. 14, nr 2, s. 191–220.

² TRIX F., PSENKA C., *Exploring the Color of Glass: Letters of Recommendation for Female and Male Medical Faculty*, "Discourse and Society", 2003, z. 14, nr 2, s. 192.

and in the household”³, including lower labour force participation and the number of hours worked⁴, gender pay gap⁵, the participation of women on corporate boards and in management positions⁶, and lower educational attainment⁷.

Substantial effort was also put into investigating the effects of generic constructions on how women are perceived and treated. As this research revealed, masculine generics are not merely a grammatical convention and certainly not as neutral as commonly thought⁸. Generic nouns and pronouns do make a woman disappear in both contemporary and historical discourse⁹, meaning that when *he*, *man*, a generic occupational title, or indeed, any other noun used generically appear in a text or a conversation, recipients of such a message visualize strictly males, and not males and females¹⁰. This seeing-male effect that genera evoke¹¹ correlates with a decrease

³ MAVISAKALYAN A., WEBER C., *Linguistic Structures and Economic Outcomes*, “Journal of Economic Surveys”, 2018, z. 32, nr 3, s. 924.

⁴ GAY V., HICKS D., SANTACREU-VASUT E., SHOHAM A. *Decomposing Culture: An Analysis of Gender, Language, and Labor Supply in the Household*, “Review of Economics of the Household”, [online], 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11150-017-9369-x>, [[data dostępu: 05.06.2024]; MAVISAKALYAN A., *Gender in Language and Gender in Employment*, “Oxford Development Studies”, 2015, z. 43, nr 4, s. 403–424.

⁵ VAN DER VELDE L., TYROWICZ J., SIWIŃSKA J., *Language and (the Estimates of) the Gender Wage Gap*, “Economics Letters”, 2015, z. 136, s. 165–170.

⁶ SANTACREU-VASUT E., SHENKAR O., SHOHAM A., *Linguistic Gender Marking and Its International Business Ramifications*, “Journal of International Business Studies”, 2014, z. 45, nr 9, s. 1170–1178.

⁷ DAVIS L., REYNOLDS M., *Gendered Language and the Educational Gender Gap*, “Economics Letters”, 2018, z. 168, s. 46–48.

⁸ CAMERON D., *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*, London, Macmillan, 1985, s. 90; GRADDOL D., SWAN J., *Gender Voices*, New York, Blackwell, 1989, s. 97; 110.

⁹ CAMERON D., *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader*, second edition, New York, Routledge, 1998.

¹⁰ BANAJI M. R., HARDIN C., *Automatic Stereotyping*, “Psychological Science”, 1996, Z. 7, nr 3, s. 136–141; GASTIL J., *Generic Pronouns and Sexist Language: The Oxymoronic Character of Masculine Generics*, “Sex Roles”, 1990, z. 23, s. 629–643; HAMILTON M. C., *Using Masculine Generics: Does Generic ‘He’ Increase Male Bias in the User’s Imagery?*, “Sex Roles”, 1988, z. 19, nr 11, s. 785–799; HAMILTON M. C., *Masculine Bias in the Attribution of Personhood: People=Male, Male=People*, “Psychology of Women Quarterly”, 1991, z. 15, nr 3, s. 393–402; HYDE J. S., *Children’s Understanding of Sexist Language*, “Developmental Psychology”, 1984, z. 20, s. 697–706; MCCONNELL A. R., FAZIO R. H., *Women as Men and People: Effects of Gender-Marked Language*, “Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin”, 1996, z. 22, s. 1004–1013; MOULTON J. G., ROBINSON M., ELIAS C., *Sex Bias in Language Use: ‘Neutral’ Pronouns That Aren’t*, American Psychologist, 1978, z. 33, s. 1032–1036; NG S. H., *Androcentric Coding of ‘Man’ and ‘His’ in Memory by Language Users*, “Journal of Experimental Social Psychology”, 1990, z. 26, nr 5, s. 455–464; SILVEIRA J., *Generic Masculine Words and Thinking*, Women’s Studies International Quarterly, 1980, z. 3, nr 2–3, s. 165–178; STOUT J. G., DASGUPTA N., *When ‘He’ Doesn’t Mean ‘You’: Gender-Exclusive Language as Ostracism*, “Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin”, 2011, z. 37, nr 6, s. 757–769.

¹¹ HARRISON L., *Cro-Magnon Woman – in Eclipse*, The Science Teacher, 1975, z. 4, s. 8–11; SCHNEIDER J. W., HACKER S. L., *Sex-Role Imagery and Use of the Generic “Man” in Introductory Texts: A Case in the Sociology of Sociology*, “The American Sociologist”, 1973, z. 8, nr 1, s. 12–18.

in women's motivation to apply for a position advertised by means of such constructions¹² and negatively affects societal perceptions concerning their suitability for the profession in question and their future success in it¹³.

Considerable publicity given in Western societies to the relation between language, cognition and behaviour and, more specifically, to the fact that gender inequalities *can* be explained with language having a causal impact, found its reflection in the work of many contemporary fiction authors. The books in question not only contain numerous scenes which show the discriminatory practices directed at contemporary working women; they also include episodes suggesting that their authors agree that combatting gender inequality may also mean that people finally recognize the danger of using specific linguistic constructions commonly known as sexist language. These language-focused episodes or scenes found in the work of Lee Child, Tess Gerritsen, Graham Masterton or Karin Wahlberg, to name a few, can be divided into two categories: episodes in which language is depicted as a medium for conveying stereotypical views and fragments in which some other sexist constructions such as masculine generics are depicted in a way that basically replicates what one finds in the so-called non-sexist style guides that started to appear in many countries in the seventies of the previous century.

We come now to an important question, namely whether the efforts taken by the aforementioned Western fiction authors to sensitize their readers to the fact that even unprejudiced people who do not endorse sexist stereotypes are bound to use language in a way that activates stereotypical thinking will be equally understandable for all readers, irrespective of their sociocultural situation. As argued below, readers in countries in which the knowledge of how certain linguistic constructions contribute towards discrimination is not a well-established component of their collective identity may find it more difficult to interpret the author's intentions. By contrast, readers living in places in which such knowledge has been spread for decades should experience no problems of this kind, seeing the episodes which show how language affects the way characters think and act as complementary with respect to fragments in which discrimination experienced by women is depicted. By knowledge, I mean, after Veronika Koller, both "second-hand knowledge gained through media consumption"¹⁴ as well as knowledge acquired in various contexts, for instance at school or at work.

The material presented in the article was extracted from the Polish translations of the seven parts of a popular crime series by a Swedish author Karin Wahlberg. Section

¹² BEM S. L., BEM D. J., *Does Sex-Biased Job Advertising 'Aid and Abet' Sex Discrimination?*, "Journal of Applied Social Psychology", 1973, z. 3, nr 1, s. 6–18.

¹³ BRIERE J., LANKTREE C., *Sex-Role Related Effects of Sex Bias in Language*, "Sex Roles", 1983, z. 9, s. 625–632; VERVECKEN D., HANNOVER B., WOLTER I., *Changing (S)Expectations: How Gender Fair Job Descriptions Impact Children's Perceptions and Interest Regarding Traditionally Male Occupations*, "Journal of Vocational Behavior", 2013, z. 82, nr 3, s. 208–220.

¹⁴ KOLLER V., *How to Analyse Collective Identity in Discourse – Textual and Contextual Parameters*, "Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis across Disciplines", 2012, z. 5, nr 2, s. 19–38.

two contains an overview of episodes which present the major forms of occupational inequality experienced by Wahlberg's two female characters, namely surgeon Veronika Lundborg and police officer Louise Jasinski. In section three, the focus falls on scenes which suggest that, for Wahlberg, one of the main reasons why women are discriminated against is the existence of stereotypical (language-mediated) beliefs still common in Swedish society. In section four, attention is turned to episodes which sound like a fictitious representation of what research on masculine generics helped uncover, mostly their ability to create the so-called seeing-male effect. As regards the last section of the article, here the societal knowledge concerning genera in Western countries and in Poland is discussed and hypothesised to result in two potentially different readings of Wahlberg's message concerning language as one of the reasons why gender divide still exists. The hypothesis concerning the societal knowledge about language in relation to gender inequality is supported with citations from the literature on this topic and, in the case of the second setting analysed, Poland, also introspective data stemming from casual observation of how the issue of language *vis á vis* gender equality is still presented in the local media.

Occupational sexism in Wahlberg's Claes Claesson series

Reading the blurbs on any of the series seven parts, future readers have grounds to believe that what they are buying is a typical crime story – a genre that, as one of the reviewers of Wahlberg's books put it¹⁵, will offer “plentiful suspense to keep you warm in the winter chill”. Having read a few pages into these books, it becomes clear why Wahlberg has been referred to as “Sweden's answer to Tess Gerritsen”. Both this and the Rizzoli and Isles series by Gerritsen namely contain numerous episodes describing on-the-job discrimination experienced by women who decided not to “follow traditional prescriptions regarding appropriate jobs and the absolute priority of domestic responsibilities”¹⁶.

The episodes in question show that discrimination may start at the beginning of one's career, with female doctors discouraged from going into predominantly male-identified specialties such as surgery¹⁷ and male doctors effectively pushed away from female-identified specialties such as obstetrics and gynaecology¹⁸. The favouritism of men can also be observed at the hiring stage, as evidenced in scenes in which

¹⁵ A fragment of Eleonora Kirk's review of *The afflicted* (Swedish *De drabbade*); retrieved from: [online], <https://bonnierights.se/work/the-afflicted/>. The second quote comes from this part of Kirk's review in which she cites a fragment of another review of the book which appeared in *Femina*.

¹⁶ A citation from *Dictionary of Sociology*; sv. 'Sex roles', s. 313. In Gerritsen's series, the two counterparts of Wahlberg's Louise Jasinski, a female police officer, and Veronika Lundborg, a surgeon, are Jane Rizzoli, also a police officer and doctor Maura Isles, a pathologist.

¹⁷ WAHLBERG K., *Pocięzyciel*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Świat Książki, 2014, s. 176.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, s. 109–110.

hiring male surgeons who happen to be one's good friends¹⁹ and employing female surgeons only to improve the representation for women in a male-dominated specialty²⁰ are not infrequent either. Finally, there are scenes which confirm that female police officers experience similar problems, as (male) superiors admit to initially being against hiring them²¹.

Turning to on-the-job forms of discrimination characteristic of the medical setting that contribute towards a poisoned atmosphere at work, they include, firstly, being passed over for more important assignments. More complicated (prestigious) brain surgeries are regularly entrusted to male surgeons²² while experienced female surgeons such as Veronika must content themselves with surgeries their colleagues consider too trivial to perform²³. Complaining (let alone mentioning that discrimination is related to gender) is not an option. As a result, female doctors try to ignore such repeated small slights from both male doctors or co-workers of the same sex as being told they could not be contacted (even though they are spending the entire days at home with a baby)²⁴, witnessing their male colleagues claim credit for the surgeries *they* performed²⁵ or being assigned such time-consuming tasks as mentoring younger colleagues without being asked²⁶. Being seriously disadvantaged in contact with people outside the profession completes the picture: female surgeons are perceived by patients as less competent²⁷ and ignored while in the company of male doctors²⁸, on assumption that said males must be surgeons and the women at their side merely nurses.

As regards the on-the-job forms of discrimination experienced by female police officers, the first one consists of favouritism promoting men²⁹. The next form of discrimination, unwanted sexual advances or abuse, is also evidenced³⁰. Being perceived as a greater threat than one's male colleagues³¹, being steered towards specializations

¹⁹ Ibidem, s. 387.

²⁰ Wahlberg K., *Ostatni dyżur*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Świat Książki, 2014, s. 178.

²¹ Ibidem, s. 311.

²² WAHLBERG K., *Dziewczynka z majowymi kwiatkami*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Świat Książki, 2012, 286–287.

²³ WAHLBERG K., *Szpital*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Świat Książki, 2012, s. 173; Wahlberg K., *Pocieszyciel*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Świat Książki, 2014, s. 200; 257.

²⁴ WAHLBERG K., *Śmierć sprzedawcy dywanów*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Świat Książki, 2015, s. 180; 221.

²⁵ WAHLBERG K., *Pocieszyciel*, op. cit., s. 59.

²⁶ WAHLBERG K., *Szpital*, op. cit., s. 366.

²⁷ WAHLBERG K., *Ostatni dyżur*, op. cit., s. 223; 2014, WAHLBERG K., *Pocieszyciel*, op. cit., s. 204.

²⁸ Wahlberg, K., *Pocieszyciel*, op. cit., s. 59.

²⁹ Ibidem, s. 330.

³⁰ WAHLBERG K., *Ostatni dyżur*, op. cit., s. 114; WAHLBERG K., *Podglądaczka*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Świat Książki, 2013, s. 251; WAHLBERG K., *Zastygłe życie*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Świat Książki, 2011, s. 42; WAHLBERG K., *Szpital*, op. cit., s. 161; WAHLBERG K., *Pocieszyciel*, op. cit., s. 130.

³¹ WAHLBERG K., *Dziewczynka z majowymi kwiatkami*, op. cit., s. 47; WAHLBERG K., *Śmierć sprzedawcy dywanów*, op. cit., s. 103.

(e.g. work with problem families) that are perceived as an extension of women's other sex roles³², a lack of mentors of the same sex³³ and, finally, mistrust that female police officers experience in contact with the public³⁴ characterize this occupational setting as equally discriminative as the one in which female surgeons function.

Language-mediated stereotypes as one of the root causes of occupational sexism

In addition to scenes in which Wahlberg provides a description of various forms of discrimination experienced by characters whose career choices are atypical, there are some episodes in which the unequal treatment they experience is explained with stereotypes³⁵ having a causal impact. Quite a significant number of these stereotypical views concerns personality traits³⁶ women are believed to possess. It is, for instance, believed that women are too sensitive³⁷ or too unpredictable³⁸ to make good surgeons and it can be assumed that their entry to law enforcement is opposed on grounds that they lack agentive personality traits (e.g., being aggressive, dominant, forceful, willing to take risks or decisive) men are typically credited with. By this logic, the only occupational areas which Swedish women are expected to enter include being a nurse, a midwife³⁹, a teacher⁴⁰, a kindergarten teacher⁴¹ or a secretary⁴², meaning careers which are a natural extension of those sex roles in which their communal nature is revealed. The same concerns on-the-job activities which require patience, ability to listen, sensitivity or empathy, evidenced in fragments in which Jasinski is expected to take over tasks connected with family violence⁴³ or fragments in which female doctors are expected to mentor young, inexperienced staff members⁴⁴. Finally, women are also

³² WAHLBERG K., *Śmierć sprzedawcy dywanów*, op. cit., s. 103.

³³ WAHLBERG K., *Dziewczynka z majowymi kwiatkami*, op. cit., s. 53; WAHLBERG K., *Pocieszyciel*, op. cit., s. 31.

³⁴ WAHLBERG K., *Dziewczynka z majowymi kwiatkami*, op. cit., s. 424.

³⁵ As defined by Basow; BASOW S. A., *Gender Stereotypes. Traditions and Alternatives*, Monterey, CA, Brooks and Cole, 1986.

³⁶ CUDDY A. J., FISKE S. T., GLICK P., *Warmth and Competence as Universal Dimensions of Social Perception: The stereotype Content Model and the BIAS Map*, "Advances in Experimental Social Psychology", 2008, z. 40, s. 61–149; DIEKMAN A. B., EAGLY A. H., *Stereotypes as Dynamic Constructs: Women and Men of the Past, Present and Future*, "Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin", 2000, z. 26, nr 10, s. 1171–1188.

³⁷ WAHLBERG K., *Pocieszyciel*, op. cit., s. 176.

³⁸ WAHLBERG K., *Ostatni dyżur*, op. cit., s. 223.

³⁹ WAHLBERG K., *Szpital*, op. cit., s. 59–60.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, s. 62.

⁴¹ Ibidem, s. 159.

⁴² WAHLBERG K., *Dziewczynka z majowymi kwiatkami*, op. cit., s. 188.

⁴³ WAHLBERG K., *Śmierć sprzedawcy dywanów*, op. cit., s. 103.

⁴⁴ WAHLBERG K., *Szpital*, op. cit., s. 366.

permitted to enter areas connected with the world of fashion, beauty and glamour: jobs (beautician, model, actress)⁴⁵ associated with trivial connotations and a strong reference to the body rather than intellect.

Since one of the stereotypes concerning gender-typical character traits concerns women's purportedly accommodating nature, a significant number of fragments contains allusions to them either conform to or rebel against what others expect them to do⁴⁶. A tendency to conform seems to prevail, as evidenced in fragments in which Veronika and Louise decide to brush off discriminatory remarks/behaviour experienced at work⁴⁷. To show they are willing to accommodate, working women smile all the time⁴⁸; indeed, scenes in which Veronika and Louise decide to walk away with a smile are too numerous to cite. However, such an accommodating reaction seems reasonable when one considers the negative reaction women should prepare for if they decided to display features that are not normally associated with their gender, such as efficacy and ambition⁴⁹. Gender-typical character traits (being nice) in women who chose atypical male-identified careers cause similar discomfort in their colleagues⁵⁰ which corresponds with a widespread stereotype according to which all assertive, career-focused women are unfeminine or bossy.

Willingness to adhere to the expectations others hold can also be observed in private life, as evidenced in a fragment in which Veronika recollects how she and other female medicine students used to lie to young men about studying literature or languages⁵¹ knowing that coming across as smart scares boys off. The dislike for educated and independent women is also reported for other national settings⁵² such as Turkey. Consequently, women in both milieus usually assume the role of prototypical caretakers, taking care of children, cooking and cleaning the house⁵³. The role of children is often taken over by other family members, e.g. aging parents⁵⁴ and husbands (or partners) who expect their wives to nurse them, and feel resentful if they refuse⁵⁵.

⁴⁵ WAHLBERG K., *Dziewczynka z majowymi kwiatkami*, op. cit., s. 180.

⁴⁶ WAHLBERG K., *Szpital*, op. cit., s. 103–104.

⁴⁷ WAHLBERG K., *Szpital*, op. cit., s. 366; WAHLBERG K., *Pocieszyciel*, op. cit., s. 59; WAHLBERG K., *Śmierć sprzedawcy dywanów*, op. cit., s. 180; 221.

⁴⁸ WAHLBERG K., *Dziewczynka z majowymi kwiatkami*, op. cit., s. 188; idem, *Szpital*, op. cit., s. 360.

⁴⁹ WAHLBERG K., *Śmierć sprzedawcy dywanów*, op. cit., s. 103.

⁵⁰ Ibidem, s. 103; 445.

⁵¹ WAHLBERG K., *Pocieszyciel*, op. cit., s. 196.

⁵² WAHLBERG K., *Śmierć sprzedawcy dywanów*, op. cit., s. 76.

⁵³ WAHLBERG K., *Zastygłe życie*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Świat Książki, 2011, s. 30; 53–56; 61; idem, *Dziewczynka z majowymi kwiatkami*, op. cit., s. 28; 355; idem, *Szpital*, op. cit., s. 103; 162; idem, *Pocieszyciel*, op. cit., s. 27; 198; 203; 205.

⁵⁴ WAHLBERG K., *Zastygłe życie*, op. cit., s. 72.

⁵⁵ WAHLBERG K., *Zastygłe życie*, op. cit., s. 23; 25; idem, *Śmierć sprzedawcy dywanów*, op. cit., s. 181.

This strong expectation concerning the absolute priority of domestic responsibilities, i.e. that women should put their family first also affects societal attitudes towards which jobs they can do, and even if they should work at all. A stereotypical view that women who have children are naturally less capable of devoting their attention to their jobs, especially such demanding ones as being a surgeon is reported⁵⁶. Some male characters do not hide their irritation at their wives' determination to retain what they refer to as their "silly" jobs⁵⁷ and some worry that if their partners indeed succeed in their careers, they will feel inferior seeing them instead of themselves in the centre of everybody's attention⁵⁸. Fragments in which male characters expect that their partners patiently listen to what *they* did at work, without bothering to ask what their day looked like⁵⁹ point in the same direction: in families in which both partners work, it is always *his* job that matters. Notably, the stereotypical, language-mediated views concerning specific gender roles women are expected to keep acting out, which includes the relative unimportance of women's work, are held not only by their spouses/partners, but also other family members, primarily parents⁶⁰.

On balance, it should be noted that stereotypical views on gender-appropriate character traits/behaviour also concern male, and not just female characters. Men hide their emotions, knowing that if they did not, they might be⁶¹ perceived as unmanly and lose respect of their co-workers⁶². However, when one compares the number of fragments which stereotype women and men, it becomes obvious that it is the former who are stereotyped more often – a direct reason why so many of them resent they were born girls⁶³.

Generic masculine words as another important reason for the unequal treatment of women

The elimination of these deeply entrenched, language-mediated gender stereotypes, no matter how important, would still not suffice: according to Wahlberg, combatting discrimination also means that people should abstain from using such demeaning words as *girls*⁶⁴ as well as remember what they were told about masculine generic nouns (mainly occupational titles) and pronouns used generically.

The episodes in which Wahlberg warns against the use of masculine generics as one of those linguistic conventions which, while they may not result from conscious

⁵⁶ WAHLBERG K., *Ostatni dyżur*, op. cit., s. 27.

⁵⁷ WAHLBERG K., *Szpital*, op. cit., s. 193; idem, *Pocieszyciel*, op. cit., s. 228.

⁵⁸ WAHLBERG K., *Pocieszyciel*, op. cit., s. 351.

⁵⁹ WAHLBERG K., *Szpital*, op. cit., s. 103–104; 405.

⁶⁰ WAHLBERG K., *Śmierć sprzedawcy dywanów*, op. cit., s. 74–76; 93.

⁶¹ WAHLBERG K., *Pocieszyciel*, op. cit., s. 184.

⁶² WAHLBERG K., *Dziewczynka z majowymi kwiatkami*, op. cit., s. 63.

⁶³ WAHLBERG K., *Pocieszyciel*, op. cit., s. 62.

⁶⁴ WAHLBERG K., *Podglądaczka*, op. cit., s. 276; idem, *Szpital*, op. cit., s. 103–104.

sexism, reflect stereotypical thinking, can be divided into three categories. The first of them consists of fragments in which genera are presented as an imperfect reflection of extralinguistic reality. Respective scenes include a fragment in which a minor character says her son is talking to the head surgeon [Pol. *ordynator*] and the reader knows that the referent is Veronika Lundborg⁶⁵ or an episode⁶⁶ in which Veronika refers to Erika Jung as one of her husband's inspectors [Pol. *była jednym z inspektorów Claessa*]. The remaining scenes in which this property of genera is pointed at show the mother of a girl who was seduced by her teacher, Jan Boden, state that⁶⁷ teachers [Pol. *nauczyciele*] should not have intimate relations with their students [Pol. *uczniowie*], whereby a reader may observe that while the former reflects the sex of the perpetrator, the latter does not. The same applies to a scene⁶⁸ in which the first generic noun used, *prokurator* [Eng. *prosecutor*] indeed refers to a man, while the second of them, *adwokat* [Eng. *attorney*] to a woman and sentences in which a masculine generic directly precedes or follows a text fragment in which a character's sex is made clear (e.g., *Maria Stevenson, ordynator wydziału psychiatrii* [Eng. *Maria Stevenson, head of the psychiatry department; lekarz prowadzący ordynator Veronika Lundborg* [Eng. *doctor in charge head surgeon Veronika Lundborg*; my translation]⁶⁹).

In addition to episodes in which masculine genera portray language as not necessarily a one-to-one reflection of extralinguistic reality, there are quite a few scenes in which they are depicted as capable of creating the seeing-male effect – a psychological mechanism that means that they are interpreted in a gendered way. Such evidence on how generics encourage such a “men only” interpretation is presented in e.g. a scene in which inspector Claesson receives a call from a colleague who informs him that a body was found at the local hospital⁷⁰, which makes Claesson assume that the victim was a male doctor, a conclusion he arrives at after being “primed” by a number of nouns such as *ciało* [Eng. *body*], *personel medyczny* [Eng. *medical personnel*] and *pacjent* [Eng. *patient*], all of which can denote persons of either sex. In the remaining episodes in this category, readers come across police officers repeatedly remind their colleagues that language-induced assumptions concerning the perpetrator's sex may be unfounded and that – until the perpetrator's identity has been established – they ought to remember that it could be either a man or a woman. The linguistic “triggers” that are evoked on these occasions⁷¹ include such lexemes as *sprawca* [Eng. *perpetrator*], *świadek* [Eng. *witness*] and *facet* [Eng. *guy*] in a fragment⁷² where Claesson corrects Veronika who has already made an assumption concerning the perpetrator's

⁶⁵ WAHLBERG K., *Dziewczynka z majowymi kwiatkami*, op. cit., s. 123.

⁶⁶ WAHLBERG K., *Pocieszyciel*, op. cit., s. 153.

⁶⁷ WAHLBERG K., *Szpital*, op. cit., s. 294.

⁶⁸ WAHLBERG K., *Zastygłe życie*, op. cit., s. 400.

⁶⁹ WAHLBERG K., *Pocieszyciel*, op. cit., s. 179; 287.

⁷⁰ WAHLBERG K., *Ostatni dyżur*, op. cit., s. 15.

⁷¹ WAHLBERG K., *Podglądaczka*, op. cit., s. 229; 250; idem, *Dziewczynka z majowymi kwiatkami*, op. cit., s. 379–380.

⁷² WAHLBERG K., *Pocieszyciel*, op. cit., s. 115.

sexual identity (whom she refers to as *the guy with the gun*; Pol.: *facet od pistoletu*) that it could have, as well, been a woman. In conclusion, if genera indeed possess this ability to delude, it stands to reason that people should want to reflect (and act) on it, especially in situations in which making such false assumptions could have very serious consequences, as is the case with police work.

As regards the third category of fragments in which genera are focused on, it is episodes that imply that the Swedish society has been prepared to view certain linguistic constructions as capable of biasing people in a certain way – e.g., triggering a way of thinking (and acting) that may put a police investigation on a false track or encourage attitudes towards women that are no longer acceptable. Such an assumption on Swedes having been primed on language's capability to not just reflect but also create a reality is borne out by e.g., a fragment in which head surgeon Petrén corrects himself after initially referring to his mixed staff by means of a generic *każdy* [Eng. *everyone*] which, as he immediately realizes, is a form he should not have used⁷³. An identical hypothesis can be formed on the basis of a fragment in which another (male) doctor remembers how everyone applauded, after which he specifies that every woman applauded [Pol. *wszyscy temu przyklasnęli a dokładniej mówiąc wszystkie*]⁷⁴.

The assumption that fragments in which the properties of genera are presented may have been placed there as a reminder to readers that what one says re-emerges in the form of specific social outcomes such as discrimination is also confirmed by what we find in books by other Swedish authors which contain similar allusions to increased awareness among the Swedes of genera *vis á vis* cognition and behaviour. The novels by Mari Jungstedt and Håkan Nesser⁷⁵ in which the capability of genera to delude and discriminate and the characters' awareness of this fact is documented are a good example.

The issue of language *vis á vis* gender equality as presented in some Western countries and in Poland

The literature on language in relation to gender equality informs that until the 1970s, Western societies (by which I mean both Swedes as well as people living in such English-speaking countries as Great Britain, the U.S. or Canada) treated the establishment of norms on correct language use as – basically – men's business: after all, it was men's names that appeared on the covers of their grammar books and/or dictionaries. In the seventies, the first signs of change could be witnessed, with quite a few women evidently aspiring to "becoming *norm-makers*"⁷⁶ and not, as before,

⁷³ WAHLBERG K., *Ostatni dyżur*, op. cit., s. 48.

⁷⁴ WAHLBERG K., *Podglądaczka*, op. cit., s. 231.

⁷⁵ JUNGSTEDT M., *Zawiedzione nadzieje*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Bellona, 2018, s. 161; NESSER H., *Komisarz i cisza*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Czarna Owca, 2013, s. 306.

⁷⁶ PAUWELS A., *Linguistic Sexism and Feminist Linguistic Activism* [W:] J. Holmes, M. Meyerhoff (red.), *The Handbook of Language and Gender*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2003, s. 551.

merely norm enforcers. As these Western societies were explained, the elimination of language that demeans, ignores or stereotypes members of either sex was necessary on grounds that what people say (or write) *is* relevant to such real-world issues as discrimination of women – a claim rejected “by (male-dominated) language academics”⁷⁷ who argued that the freshly-formulated proposals for non-sexist language use merely circumscribe speakers’ resources without addressing any real issues in sexual politics.

A repeated presentation of research that confirmed that how women are talked about translates into how they are treated in, e.g. TV programmes, the press and, more recently, online reference sites with educational content did, eventually, brought about the expected results. Many language users, when confronted with such hard scientific data, realized that attempts to eliminate bias from language undertaken by “government agencies, feminist groups, professional associations, religious organizations, educational institutions, publishing firms, and media institutions”⁷⁸ they were witnessing were, indeed, warranted. These attempts included, among others, the Employment Equity Act and the Federal Contractors’ Program Canada introduced in 1986 that required that *all* Canadian employers who would like to bid for government contracts introduce “supportive initiatives *such as the use of non-sexist language*”⁷⁹ or an initiative, undertaken by Canadian universities to “eliminate sexist language from their educational materials”⁸⁰, as a result of which “sexist course titles such as ‘*Man and his Environment*’ have virtually disappeared”. The publication of non-sexist style guides such as *The ABC of Style* (the U.S.), *The Non-Sexist Code of Practice for Book Publishers* (Great Britain) or *Words That Count Women In* (Canada) addressed at various societal groups constitute another example of efforts taken in order to remind language users that the linguistic choices they make affect how others are treated.

This brief characterization of initiatives taken in many national settings in order to persuade the public to update their phrasing contrasts with what can be observed in countries such as Poland. Though a more widespread use of gender-transparent occupational titles is encouraged by the leading linguistic authorities such as the Council for the Polish Language⁸¹, it is solely on grounds that it would better reflect the entry

⁷⁷ Ibidem.

⁷⁸ MARTYNA W., *Beyond the ‘He/Man’ Approach: The Case for Non-Sexist Language*, *Signs*, 1980, z. 5, s. 482–492.

⁷⁹ EHRLICH S., KING R., *Gender-Based Language Reform and the Social Construction of Meaning*, *Discourse and Society*, 1992, z. 3, nr 2, s. 158.

⁸⁰ Ibidem, s. 159.

⁸¹ This standpoint taken by The Council for the Polish Language at the Presidium of the Polish Academy of Sciences (Rada Języka Polskiego przy Prezydium PAN), that is the official language regulating organ of Polish established in 1996, comes from one of the statements the council issued after two heated media debates sparked off by a 2012 and a 2019 request by Polish female politicians to be referred to by means of a gender-transparent and not a generic version of their titles. In the statements, the Council reassures the public that creating gender-transparent names by means of adding a feminine suffix to masculine nouns used generically conforms to the linguistic norm, but

of women into occupational areas previously dominated by men. The capability of genera that still prevail in speech and writing⁸² to *construe* gender inequalities is not mentioned and the public is not informed about studies that demonstrate the relation between the two. Consequently, even though Polish TV viewers can witness an increase in the number of feminatives in e.g. specimens of political discourse broadcasted, their lack of knowledge on why the use of these forms is important makes them think that they are dealing with yet another linguistic fad. Put differently, Poland is not one of those countries in which the use of generics is profiled as of any relevance to real-life issues such as inequities in status between men and women, a tendency observable both among linguistic authorities and leading media outlets and confirmed by sarcastic remarks many Poles make upon witnessing someone use a gender-transparent occupational title such as *ministra* [Eng. *female minister*].

Concluding remarks

A brief overview of initiatives taken in Western countries in order to increase the public's awareness of language as one of the reasons why gender divide still exists suggests that when Wahlberg's series is read by an average Swede or – abroad – in translation into English or German, a significant number of readers in such national settings will perceive the fragments on gender stereotypes and sexist language as the author's contribution to outlining why women (impersonated by the main female characters) continue to be discriminated against. On the contrary, a lack of comparable initiatives in countries such as Poland suggests that most Polish readers may fail to understand that there is a cause-and-effect relationship between instances of discrimination described in numerous episodes of the series and the use of linguistic constructions that, as research has shown, help perpetuate discrimination.

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says nothing about the social outcomes of using genera, let alone studies that demonstrated the correlation between the two.

⁸² KARWATOWSKA M., SZPYRA-KOZŁOWSKA J., *Lingwistyka płci. On i ona w języku polskim*, Lublin, Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2005.

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The recipient sociocultural situation as a factor in understanding author intent

Summary: In this article, the sociocultural situation of the Polish readers of a popular crime series by Karin Wahlberg is contrasted with the situation of readers in Western countries. It is argued that a presentation of generic masculine words in the former setting as merely reflexive of gender inequalities that exist may prevent the Polish readers from homing in on what seems to be a message contained in the original, i.e. the capability of language to *construe* inequality and not just reflect it.

Keywords: sexist language, masculine generics, occupational sexism, language and society

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