Review of: "Grammatical Issues of Feminatives Through the Ukrainian Prism"

Jessica Kantarovich[1]

1 University of Chicago

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

This article tackles an emerging tension in language use, particularly in public spaces: to what extent can language be reasonably altered to adhere to political issues of representativeness, and are there ways of reconciling linguistic constraints and political/social goals more harmoniously? Scholars of language (and policy-makers) have certainly grappled with this issue in dealing with gender, such as in the use of gender-neutral language, singular "they", neo-pronouns, and other related phenomena (e.g., the avoidance of gendered Latino/Latina in favor of Latinx and Latine, a coinage I encountered for the first time just today). The issue of "gendered language" was controversially covered by the linguist Geoff Pullum on the blog *Language Log*, where he expressed that he found singular "they" ungrammatical with a personal name antecedent (https://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=35641, https://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=35688), that is, the exact context when it is used for individuals who identify as non-binary and have elected to be referred to by "they" instead of "he" or "she." The result was a barrage of now-deleted comments on the blog from a variety of readers, many of them linguists who found Pullum's position either offensive or at the very least irresponsible. Another blog post was written in response to Pullum's posts, authored by the linguists Emily M. Bender, Natasha Warner, and Eric Baković, urging that the best course of action in discussing disempowered groups' language use and preferences is to "stop talking and listen to them at length...to find out why what you're doing is hurtful" (https://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=35776). For his part, Pullum's reaction was also one of offense: "Telling me I am required for political reasons to use a construction that strikes me as ungrammatical, and judging me morally and politically for not instantly obeying, is the most extreme manifestation of prescriptivist Stalinism I have ever encountered. It amounts to an insistence that I should adopt an artificially invented language to replace my own idiolect..." (https://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=35688).

I bring up this debate because I think it is very relevant to the framing of the present article by Maksym Vakulenko, and also because it encapsulates the difficult position of linguists (and linguistic theory) when it comes to grappling with grammatical changes that come in the form of external recommendations and requests, whether from a position of power (as in the case of a standardizing language authority) or from the disempowered, as explained by Baković et al. with respect to gender-non-conforming users of English. I share the view espoused (to some degree) by all of the linguists in this debate: it is not the role of linguists to make prescriptive recommendations about how language should be used in different social settings, and the use of linguistic theory or even linguistic facts to do so is problematic.

Thus, from the outset, I think the author of the present article should make his ontological position clear, because most

linguists will bristle at the idea of using "grammatical criteria" as a justification for making prescriptive recommendations. Is the author approaching this matter as a scholar of language (through a sociolinguistic study of language use), or as an advocate of a specific language policy, making recommendations for how best to standardize the use of feminatives or feminine/female-centered language? If we are dealing with the latter case, to whom are the recommendations directed? The conclusion states that "it is proposed to recognize a general gender"--who should recognize it? State/educational authorities? Activists? The media? Speakers of Ukrainian?

The author's attempt to be both descriptive and prescriptive simultaneously is untenable because a fundamental precept of linguistic analysis is that a language will not develop in a way that is at odds with its structure or with language universals: the idea that, for example, the "elimination...of masculine forms...when they refer to a group of people regardless of their gender...will result in undesirable consequences for the language system" (p. 2) is not empirically founded. Undesirable for whom? Not undesirable (and certainly not impossible) from the standpoint of grammatical patterns in the world's languages. Perhaps undesirable from the standpoint of "terminology theory," but since the author does not explain exactly what position he is taking within this theory, it is difficult to assess whether the arguments make sense. (The main citations for terminology theory appear to be of the author himself, but not of the specific approach to terminology theory that he has adopted.)

I think a less fraught way of considering these issues, while maintaining linguistic objectivity, would be to point out why the grammatical constraints described may result in a lack of uptake of new feminatives, and why there may be some resistance on the part of the speaker population to use them (such as the resistance professed by Pullum in his blog posts). If the author's goal is to improve communication (or to support representation of different genders through language use), there is a way to maintain a descriptive stance about the variation in the use of feminatives and different ideologies around them, without dismissing them as linguistically impossible or incorrect. A discussion of best practices around the coinage of new terminology (which I believe is the ultimate goal of this exercise) does not need to be couched in linguistic absolutes in this way.

In summary, I think the most positive change to this article would be to modify the discussion to be less about the "expressiveness" and "degradation" of the language, and more about "recommendations for coining terminology on the basis of communicative ease, morphological consistency, equitable representation of women and non-binary individuals, etc." This should go hand-in-hand with saying, up front, that the methodology and framework have been developed out of terminology theory, while providing a specific formulation of that theory. Some context would also be helpful for assessing the appropriateness of the research and the conclusions: why are these terms important and worth talking about? Who is using them (which pockets of the population) and how widely are the terms being used (how frequently)? (Again, what are the stakes?) The framing of the article by Kirey-Sitnikova 2021 on feminatives in Russian does a good job of presenting the different stakeholders: activists, LGBT+ groups, governing language authorities. Vakulenko cites this article but does not engage with it directly, which is a shame because Kirey-Sitnikova is examining exactly the same questions, but in Russian, and discusses the challenges around the neutralization approach that is ultimately proposed here.

In addition to these broader considerations, I would recommend several other changes to improve this article.

1. It is not clear who the intended audience of this article is; I am a linguist with a background in Slavic, so I was able to follow the Ukrainian examples and the discussion of the grammar/morphology, but I think anyone (including other linguists) who does not specialize in Ukrainian and the specific theoretical apparatuses that are referenced would have a hard time appreciating the arguments. I recommend defining grammatical terms and illustrating them with examples. There are many places where this would be helpful:

   Terms that should be defined or explained: "language enrichment" (2), "feminist linguistics" (2), "tradition of naming women" (2) [what is meant by naming?], "terminology theory" (3), "law of linguistic sign asymmetry" (4), "definite gender" (6)

   Areas where examples are needed to illustrate the patterns:

   p. 2: "masculine forms in the generalizing function of the type *studenti, žácí, učitelé*" -- translate the words and explain what about them is generalizing

   p. 4: "inability to express the desired sense"/"lack of essentiality" -- explain the issue with *barmenka*

   p. 4: how does *koležanka* violate naturalness? And similarly, why do feminatives have to be derived from an existing form (why is *pidpryjemnycja* inherently bad?)

   p. 6: what are the genders of the provided terms at the bottom of the page?

2. There are many claims about the grammatical "problems" inherent in feminatives that are not supported by linguistic evidence; these are the areas where I think the discussion must shift away from grammar and linguistics and more towards the value of consistency (and attention to standard grammatical rules) in coining new terminology.

   Similarly, on p. 2, the author notes that a limitation of studies of sociolinguistic matters is that these matters "are subject to likely ideological impacts and biases" -- but any prescriptive recommendation is necessarily going to be biased in favor of some ideological position, including the one the author adopts (e.g., grammatical consistency).

   On p. 5 "All these facts indicate the degradation of the expressing capacity of language" -- this is an ideological statement and does not correspond to what is known about language in linguistic theory. The language will not lose the ability to express anything its speakers want to express. Perhaps the author should provide additional explanation about what he means by both "degradation" and "expressing capacity": on its face, this is an overly strong statement (that is easily refuted).

   pp. 5-6: Similarly, I do not understand why the fact that a *doktorka* wrote a *doktorskaja dysertacija* (from masculine

doktor) is necessarily problematic -- both terms are derived from a root (see my note about markedness below). Perhaps the problem with these cases is that the base form is assumed to be masculine, and all other terms are therefore built upon a masculine term. Is the problem, then, really the formation of feminatives, or the perceptions around the "default" (unmarked) form?

3. Following up on (1) and (2), the exact methodology used is not clear, which may be contributing to some of the confusion in the discussion of grammatical issues. Why were these specific criteria chosen? What are the statistical patterns? There is a brief discussion about incidence vs. frequency, but no statistical generalizations are actually provided; it is difficult for readers to get a sense of the volume of these coinages. (Is it really just 13 problematic words?)

4. The discussion of the survey on perceptions of the social effects of feminatives was a particularly strong part of the article, and exactly what was needed to contextualize how these terms are actually being used and perceived by Ukrainian speakers. More of this context (in the introduction) would be helpful.

5. The discussion of the morphological formation of feminatives (how they are often relative to a shorter, "masculinative" form) may benefit from a consideration of the notion of morphological (and semantic) markedness. (Much has been written about markedness; Bybee 2010 provides an overview.)

6. There are some issues with mechanics (as well as English) in the article.

    i. Several foonotes are written in Russian and Ukrainian.
    ii. Linguistic examples set apart from the text should be numbered, and word-by-word translations should be tab-aligned with the Ukrainian word above. (This applies to all of the examples in Section 5, which are very interesting and well-chosen to highlight the issues with grammatical gender vs. biological gender in Ukrainian, but somewhat difficult to follow.) The Leipzig conventions are standard for linguistics: https://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/pdf/Glossing-Rules.pdf
    iii. p. 7: linguistic examples should additionally be bolded to highlight the word in question (as in the examples later in the article)

References

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