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## **Women and Homosexuals: Some Aspects of Politically Correct Gender-Related Words in the UK, Germany, Spain, France, and Poland (A Seminar Project)\***

### Abstract

The contribution contrasts countries concerning aspects of gender-related linguistic correctness: (1) How should women be addressed? (2) How should homosexuals be termed? For this, we look at the UK, Germany, Spain, France, and Poland. We give insights into academic and journalistic observations and consult modern dictionaries in order to find out to what degree countries are linguistically similar. We note that (a) for words that, over time, have been considered inappropriate a lexical gap and/or lexical alternative develops, (b) in case of more words there is preference for an international word, and (c) many alternatives are of academic origin.

### Sommaire

Cette contribution compare des pays quant à des aspects de “politiquement correct” en ce qui concerne la langue liée aux genres: (1) Comment s’adresser à une femme? (2) Comment nommer les homosexuels? Pour cela, nous regardons aux situations en Angleterre, Allemagne, Espagne, France et Pologne. Nous donnons un aperçu des observations académiques et journalistiques et consultons des dictionnaires pour gagner une impression si ces pays sont pareils sur le plan linguistique. Nous constatons que (a) pour des mots qui, au fil de temps, sont considérés inappropriés se développent une lacune et/ou une alternative, (b) en cas de plusieurs alternatives, on préfère un mot international, et (c) beaucoup d’alternatives sont d’origine académique.

### Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag beschäftigt sich länderkontrastiv mit Aspekten gender-bezogener sprachlicher Korrektheit: (1) Wie soll man Frauen anreden? (2) Wie soll man Homosexuelle benennen? Hierfür blicken wir auf Großbritannien, Deutschland, Spanien, Frankreich und Polen. Wir geben einen Einblick in akademische und journalistische Beobachtungen und ziehen moderne Wörterbücher zu Rate, um einen Eindruck zu erhalten, inwieweit sich diese Länder sprachlich gleichen. Wir stellen dabei fest, dass (a) für Wörter, die im Laufe der Zeit als unangemessen empfunden werden, eine sprachliche Lücke und/oder ein Ersatzausdruck entsteht, (b) bei mehreren Wörtern Präferenz für ein internationales Wort besteht, und (c) viele Alternativen akademischen Ursprungs sind.

## 1. Introduction

This language-contrastive paper examines the similarities and differences found in discriminating language in English, Polish, German, Spanish, and French. The goal is to both show how linguistic taboos and euphemisms compare to each other in different European languages and to reveal what motivates the objection to certain words. First, the essential terms “taboo” and the closely related phenomena “euphemism” and “political correctness” will be defined. In the following study, contemporary examples with focus on gender-related discrimination in Britain, Poland, Germany, Spain, and France will be investigated with respect to the following research question: What are the similarities, differences and effects of linguistic taboos and resulting euphemistic expressions with

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regard to address terms for women and words for homosexuals? An answer to the research question will be proposed in the conclusion to this essay. The data for this study was extracted from previous research on the above-mentioned topics, as well as from various online articles which served as examples of formal language production. None of the chosen articles which served as source for examples are older than 15 years in order to allow for a synchronic perspective. The purpose of this method was to both find authentic examples and to analyze the context in which they are used and avoided nowadays. Since our focus was on comparing existing and well-documented expressions interlinguistically with regard to their meaning rather than frequency, a qualitative study seemed to cater best to our research question.

Linguistic taboos are a way in which society can express its disapproval of a certain behaviour or, more specifically, a way of speaking which can be considered harmful to its members or violate the morals of the general public (Pan 2013: 2109). The original Polynesian word *tabu* means ‘prohibited’ and ‘untouchable’ (Süwolto 2017: 6). As linguistic features, taboos are subject to political and social change (Reutner 2009: 8) and are highly sensitive to the nature of different cultures and languages (Schröder 2008: 51). The establishment of a word or expression as a new taboo in a society requires that the public is aware of the rules and that the avoidance of a topic is of general interest (Schröder 2008: 52). They can also be understood as pragmatic markers of social limits and prohibited acts (Süwolto 2017: 8). Put in a more general way, taboos are a linguistic means of marking implicit norms within a society and are used to secure its system of cultural values (Süwolto 2017: 101). Euphemisms are frequently correlated with an established taboo in a society or the repression of a linguistic issue (Chilton 1987: 12) and can be described as a part of verbal avoidance strategies (Chilton 1987: 14). Therefore, one could say that the emergence of a euphemism is the direct consequence of a developed social linguistic taboo, as it is used in place of these rather sensitive, unpleasant, and disturbing topics (Ren/Yu 2013: 45). The word *euphemism* comes from Ancient Greek *εὖ* ‘well, good’ and the Ancient Greek verb *φημι* ‘say, speak’. In brief, euphemisms are used to express oneself more politely, to downplay an issue or, generally, to avoid a social linguistic taboo (Pan 2013: 2109).

In present times, the primary function of linguistic taboos in a society seems to be the attempted avoidance of discrimination. This includes expressions which can be considered as sexist, homophobic, or racist. The emergence of these taboos in different languages can be associated with the increasing attention given to political correctness in an increasingly inclusive European culture (Fairclough 2003: 18). Instead of using a term which puts semantic focus on prohibition and negativity, such as the term *taboo*, political correctness conveys a different approach of using language in a way that is maximally inclusive and respectful. The comparison between these two terms can give us an idea of how the perception and the meaning of the linguistic taboo has changed in recent years. Rather than transmitting the idea of “banning” certain words from the media and other public contexts, political correctness focusses on encouraging inclusive and non-discriminatory language in order to combat acts of discrimination and intolerance (Halmari 2011: 828). To which degree politically correct words can be regarded as euphemisms frequently lies in the eye of the beholder.

## 2. Sexist Ways of Addressing Women in Formal Speech across European Languages and Alternatives

In many languages, there are multiple ways of addressing women which usually depend on their marital status, age, or profession (Connor 1986: 545). The following table lists the relevant dictionary entries from the selected languages.

Dictionary	Word	Entry with Additional Information on Usage
DWDS	<i>Fräulein</i>	[veraltet] unverheiratete (jüngere) erwachsene Person weiblichen Geschlechts; tritt vor Namen, Titel unverheirateter (jüngerer) erwachsener Personen weiblichen Geschlechts
DWDS	<i>Frau</i>	erwachsene Person des weiblichen Geschlechts; Ehefrau; tritt vor Namen, Titel verheirateter, heute auch älterer unverheirateter Personen weiblichen Geschlechts; zur Personifizierung; Herrin/Gebietlerin
Cambridge Dictionary	<i>Miss</i>	a title used before the family name or full name of a single woman who has no other title; used as a form of address for a girl or a young woman; sometimes used by children to address or refer to teachers who are women; a title given to a woman who wins a beauty contest, combined with the name of the place that she represents
Cambridge Dictionary	<i>Ms</i>	a title used before the family name or full name of a woman, used to avoid saying if she is married or not
Cambridge Dictionary	<i>Mrs</i>	a title used before the family name or full name of a married woman who has no other title; used when expressing the idea that a woman is typical of or represents a quality, activity, or place;
Diccionario de la Lengua Española	<i>Señorita</i>	hija de un señor o de una persona de representación; como tratamiento de cortesía aplicado a la mujer soltera; como tratamiento de cortesía que se da a las maestras de escuela, profesoras, o también a otras mujeres que desempeñan algún servicio
Diccionario de la Lengua Española	<i>Señora</i>	como término de respeto con el que dirigirse a una mujer superior en edad, dignidad o cargo; como término de cortesía con el que dirigirse a una mujer cuyo nombre se desconoce o no se quiere mencionar; esposa o mujer; mujer del señor
Le Petit Robert	<i>Mademoiselle</i>	titre donné aux jeunes filles et aux femmes célibataires; titre de la fille aînée du frère du roi
Le Petit Robert	<i>Madame</i>	titre donné à une femme qui est ou a été mariée; titre donné à la femme du frère du roi, à la cour de France; la maîtresse de maison
Słownik języka polskiego	<i>Pan</i>	«mężczyzna» oficjalna forma grzecznościowa używana przy zwracaniu się do mężczyzny lub w rozmowie o nim
Słownik języka polskiego	<i>Panna</i>	kobieta niezamężna; dorastająca dziewczyna

Table 1

In English, *Miss* is traditionally used for unmarried or young women (Cambridge Dictionary). Today, many women reject being referred to as *Miss* since they do not feel comfortable to reveal their marital status (Lawton 2003: 215). *Mrs* has traditionally been a title for a married woman or a widow, but has become increasingly outdated, especially in professional settings (Warhurst 2015). During the 1970s, the form *Ms* gained popularity since it was regarded as a suitable equivalent of *Mr* – a form used for both married and unmarried men (Le Blanc 2017: 25).

In Spanish, two main forms for addressing women exist: *Señora* is used for married women, whereas *señorita* refers to unmarried or young women (Diccionario de la Lengua Española). Today, many Spanish women postulate for the use of *señora* only since the existence of *señorita* is regarded as unnecessary and discourteous (Pérez Ruiz 2019) (Bosque: 2012).

In Polish, we face the same contemporary problem as in English and Spanish. While the term *panna* (“Miss”) is still being used to address unmarried women, *pani* (“Mrs”) is the appellation for married females (Cambridge Dictionary). In recent years, there has been an outcry about this linguistic phenomenon, as a “Mr” is simply called *pan* without any further categorising (Toga 2017).

The same applies to French, where the forms *madame* and *mademoiselle* are used to similarly distinguish between married and unmarried or young women. Contrary to the previous examples, though, the form *mademoiselle* was removed from any official and administrative documents in 2012 (Le Petit Robert). However, it continues to be used as a means of referring to the age of a young woman in semi-formal settings.

The German language outlawed the formerly criticized term *Fräulein* in official documents even earlier, in 1971 (Novy 2021). As the word was seen as describing a woman with a low paying job who is not married yet (WDR 2011), past feminist movements deemed it as not being up to date anymore, similar to the criticisms faced in the afore-mentioned languages.

Having compared the forms of addressing women in these different languages, several parallels can be observed. All of these languages share the characteristic that traditional forms of addressment for women depend on (1) the marital status of a woman, (2) her age. All of the languages mentioned in this paper share the existence of titles for addressing females based on these criteria. There is, however, one crucial difference that should be highlighted, which regards the fact that some countries have officially outlawed these sexist forms. In France and Germany, the forms *Fräulein* and *mademoiselle* have been officially banned from official documents, thus declaring that these forms are clearly outdated and inappropriate. In other languages, such as English, Spanish and Polish, the forms *Miss*, *señorita* and *panna* are still used and endorsed by official authorities (Real Academia, Oxford English Dictionary, Słownik języka polskiego) and, even though they may have become less common in formal settings, they may still be widely used in semi-formal to informal contexts of language use. The demand for either officially devaluating traditional forms or for introducing neutral forms is valid since defining the identity of women based solely on their affiliation with a husband is deeply sexist in its very nature. As long as there are no such forms for men, women's titles should not depend on their marital status or age. In some languages, alternative forms have become common, for instance *Ms* in English. We could therefore assume that, in the future, titles for addressing women, but also men, may partially fall out of use or be replaced by neutral alternatives.

### 3. Discriminatory Expressions Used to Refer to Homosexuals in Formal Speech across Different European Languages and Alternatives

First, we present a table with the relevant entries from dictionaries on our selection of languages.

Dictionary	Word	Entry with Additional Information on Usage
Cambridge Dictionary Middle English Dictionary	<i>gay</i>	sexually attracted to people of the same sex and not to people of the opposite sex; [slang offensive] not good, reasonable, or suitable; [old-fashioned] joyous, merry, light-hearted
Cambridge Dictionary	<i>homosexual</i>	sexually attracted to people of the same sex and not to people of the opposite sex
Cambridge Dictionary	<i>queer</i>	not fitting traditional ideas about gender or sexuality, especially the idea that everyone is either male or female or that people should only have sexual relationships with the opposite sex
DWDS	<i>schwul</i>	sexuelle Neigung zum eigenen Geschlecht empfindend; [Jugendsprache, Jargon, abwertend] drückt Ablehnung, Herabwürdigung aus, unangenehm, schlecht, langweilig, andersartig, blöd
DWDS	<i>homosexuell</i>	zum gleichen Geschlecht sexuelle Zuneigung empfindend, besonders Mann zu Mann
Diccionario de la Lengua Española	<i>marica/cón</i>	[despectivo] afeminado; homosexual; falto de coraje
Diccionario de la Lengua Española	<i>homosexual</i>	dicho de una persona: inclinada sexualmente hacia individuos de su mismo sexo; perteneciente o relative a la homosexualidad o a los homosexuales
Le Petit Robert	<i>pédé</i>	[familier et injurieux] homosexuel
Le Petit Robert	<i>homosexuel</i>	personne qui éprouve une attirance sexuelle plus ou moins exclusive pour les individus de son propre sexe
Słownik języka polskiego	<i>gej</i>	Synonimy: "homoseksualista"; gejowski
Słownik języka polskiego	<i>homoseksualny</i>	pociąg seksualny do osób tej samej płci

Table 2

In most languages, there are multiple words and expressions used to refer to homosexuals with very different connotations. Many of these words' origins have little to do with today's meanings and ways of employment. In English, common words are *gay*, *homosexual*, *queer*. The English word *gay* is a cognate of French *gai* and is a word which originally had the meaning of 'happy' (17th century) or 'carefree', then developed to be associated with prostitution (18th century), arriving at the contemporary meaning of 'homosexual' during the 19th century (Cambridge Dictionary, Middle English Dictionary). The once rather descriptive word has undergone significant linguistic changes towards the negative in the past decades, depending on the context. The word *queer* has undergone an equally interesting development. With the original meaning 'different; strange' (Cambridge Dictionary), it has lost its pejorative meaning and come to be used as a similarly neutral term, similar to *gay*, to denote homosexuality.

German uses *schwul* (referring to male homosexuality) or *lesbisch* (referring to female homosexuality). Similar to the English examples, the word *schwul* originally had a very different meaning, being closely related to *schwül* ('hot, muggy weather'). Over the years, this feeling has been connected to the expression of "feeling warm towards the own sex/gender", thus coming to mean 'homosexual' (DWDS). With the introduction of *lesbisch* at a later point, *schwul* ended up being used predominantly for describing male homosexuality (Piorkowski 2020). Again, it is difficult to say whether it truly is a taboo word in the present. More unproblematic expressions in German would either be *queer* 'queer', as a loan word from English, or *homosexuell* 'homosexual'. Apart from these almost neutral words, the expressions *Schwuchtel* 'faggot' or *Lesbe* 'lesbian' are still being used derogatorily (Kreienbrink 2020).

In Polish, there is a similar problem with the word *gej* ‘gay’, as it can be used as a more or less neutral description for homosexuals, but, due to the relatively strong negative connotation of homosexuality in Poland, it can also be considered a tabooed word (Kellermann 2020; Fijolek 2020).

Spanish uses *homosexual* and *gay* as neutral words, but also older words with a more pejorative meaning such as *marica* or *maricón*. The origin of the latter expressions is yet again quite distinct. Etymologically, they are related with the name *María*, which has been one of the most common names for Spanish women over many centuries, and which can therefore be understood as a synonym for the most typical woman. This way, *marica* and *maricón* highlight that homosexuals are typically associated with women’s interests or attitudes (Diccionario de la Lengua Española). Moreover, the Anglicism *queer* is used.

In French, the word *pédé* has been used as an abbreviation of *pédéraste*, which means ‘homosexual’ (Le Petit Robert). The use of *pédé*, however, is also more and more being replaced by the word *homosexuel*, similar to what can be observed in the other languages. Besides, the Anglicism *gay* is also employed.

Overall, a certain trend in the usage of the available words can be observed. Since many of the words mentioned have ambiguous meanings with respect to connotation, a preference towards neutral and universal terms such as *homosexual*, *gay*, and *queer* has developed in many European languages (Le Monde 2012). Words with nowadays clearly pejorative connotations such as *marica* or *Schwuchtel* have come to be taboos (Maad 2019). Furthermore, the existence of the word-type “homosexual” in all of the above-mentioned languages can be observed, along with the borrowing of English *queer* into other European languages. This might reveal a certain trend in which words that bear an increased probability of being possibly understood as homophobic, such as *gay* or *schwul*, seem to be more and more rejected, and replaced by alternatives that sound academic or technical, such as the word-type *homosexual*.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, we can observe definite connections between the addressed languages across Europe, as words have become taboos or uncommon due to similar reasons. Some processes in the historical development of discriminatory words almost seem universal, as there are many resemblances in the examples shown. Furthermore, all of the above-mentioned European languages show similar strategies and coping mechanisms in order to avoid or replace problematic, discriminatory words.

- (1) If traditional expressions are found to be no longer appropriate, they are preferably omitted when not obligatory (like a lexical/pragmatic gap), or replaced by innovative neutral forms (such as *Ms*).
- (2) If multiple ways of addressing a certain group of people (such as the homosexual community) exist in a language, the preference is to recur to international words (such as English *homosexual*, French *homosexuel*, Spanish *homosexual*, Polish *homoseksualny* and the Anglicism *gay*).
- (3) In many cases, the words used as alternatives to problematic or ambiguous words are words which originated in academia. Academic words seem to be adequate alternatives since they are mostly connotated with formal and official language, and can therefore be considered as the most “neutral” words.

That being said, we should note that it is far easier to agree on terms that should not be used than the designations that should replace them. Be it sexism or homophobia, there is no doubt that we

still have not reached a situation in which we can say that all linguistic taboos in these fields have been replaced by commonly used alternatives. While there has been considerable progress in overcoming offensive language in official settings, the discussion in the media shows that there is still a lot to be done when it comes to informal and everyday speech.

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