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MEDIA COVERAGE OF TRANSGENDER DISCOURSE

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Abstract

The article examines the media coverage of transgender discourse in the Anglo-Saxon mass-media. The British and the American mass-media are chosen as a source of material for analysis on the ground of the fact that they release the news promptly, track all the latest events, are ahead of all the news. The methods of observation, comparison and description, discursive, linguistic and pragmatic, linguistic and cultural, contextual analysis are used while studying the linguistic representation of transgender discourse in a broad social context. The investigation of the empiric material shows that a great number of terms is used to describe people whose biological sex doesn't coincide with their gender identity. The situation with transgender problems in the society and their media representation may be described as children transgender revolution. There are also adversaries of this phenomenon who advocate the anti-transgender ideas. They are accused of transphobia but what they really want is to prohibit performing transgender operations to children of a very young age. The reason of that may be seen in the society's attitude towards sex and gender. In today's world with the abundance of social networks the very idea of gender is levelled and turned off. The social networks' users may not announce their gender and very often the gender of their peers remains anonymous. The conclusion is made that it's up to the school, parents and social services help children find the right balance between accepting who you really are and your gender identity.

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1. Introduction

In spite of the urgent and topical character of transgender discourse problem there is still a paucity of studies which examine the issue of media coverage of this type of social practice. Meanwhile, linguistic characteristics are not less important when the society deals with a new kind of speech and language. According to Cheshire (1984), “changes that take place in society are reflected in language, though language change tends to lag behind social change” (p. 45). Mass-media discourse can handle that variety of speech interaction which registers and describes the social changes taking place at this or that cultural and national community. Firoozi, Mostafaye, & Khaledian (2014) espouse that “mass media has played a significant strategic role in expanding mass communication, facilitating the transfer of information and awareness, strengthening socio-political sociability processes, enhancing thinking” (p. 30). Nowadays mass-media serve a firm ground for creating and transferring social information; they form a public opinion about civil events; enhance awareness about changes taking place in the society.

2. Problem Statement

Social changes which have been mentioned above have given rise to a new type of linguistics which was formed as a result of tolerance and decrease of discrimination towards homosexuality and non-cisgender, i.e. LGBTQ linguistics (queer linguistics, lavender linguistics). The main aim of queer linguistics is “the reconceptualisation of dominant discourses which shape our understanding of gender and sexuality, often to the detriment of people who, for various reasons, are judged as not meeting the heteronormative ideal” (Motschenbacher & Stegu, 2013, p. 520). The term *queer / lavender* linguistics used to be a derogative one, but now it encompasses practices revolving around people identifying themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer. The scope of interests within the framework of queer (lavender) linguistics includes the following issues: 1) the study of language used by LGBT speakers; 2) gender identity formation demonstrated in the way we talk; 3) media coverage of LGBT issues as a way of forming public opinion about gender and sexual identity. Whereas the first two points have garnered substantial attention of scholars recently (Balteiro, 2015; Greco, 2012; Zottola, 2018), the problem of media coverage of LGBT issues still needs further investigation and study.

3. Research Questions

The scope of research questions of the present study is connected with the application sphere of the methods and methodology of mass-media description in the broad social and extra-linguistic context. Mass-media perform various functions in the society, one of which is that they are “an important stimulant in encouraging and developing of education and human behavior, culture and style of living” (Koceva & Mirascieva, 2018, p. 60). Mass-media form and shape public opinion on social, political, economic, educational, cultural issues possessing a wide range of instruments to influence the target audience. The first tool with the help of which the mass-media form and shape the public opinion is informing the audience of the events which have already taken place or will happen in the future. The second tool which lets the mass-media form and shape the public opinion is the interaction which is possible due to the correlation of semantic positions of the addresser and the addressee. The third tool is

the interpretation which is closely connected with the information: by informing the interlocutor or target audience about something, influencing them in one way or another, the participants in the process of communication at the same time give an assessment of the events that take place, that is, they analyze certain actions, phenomena, personalities, relying on the concepts of “good” and “bad”. The fourth tool is the evaluation: assessment from the moral and ethical point of view the situation in a country or in the world, as well as the actions of associates or opponents, is one of the main functions of a mass-media discourse. The fifth tool which allows the mass-media form and shape the public opinion is the manipulation which consists in the suggestive usage of language; deliberate appliance of such its properties that provoke play with meanings, uncritical perception of a speech message, creation of a corresponding emotional state of the target audience and effective influence on the information consumer. The above-mentioned tools demonstrate their potential to their fullest extent in the transgender discourse, the most controversial and socially vulnerable type of interaction.

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study is to analyze the mass-media coverage of the transgender discourse revealing its typical and specific features. These features are determined by a broad social context and non-linguistic environment. The articles from the Anglo-Saxon mass-media serve as the material for analysis. The Anglo-Saxon media include any material published in English. The USA and countries of Western Europe have a special influence because the Anglo-Saxon model of journalism was compiled precisely on the basis of the experience of these two “powers”. Both the US and Europe advocate freedom of media, speech, information; democratization of all spheres of human life, which bribes the reader from the very beginning, since he trusts these sources. The status of the American and British mass-media, as well as the status of the countries themselves, is at a high level. Initially, since the materials are published in English, which is very prestigious nowadays, the Anglo-Saxon media are elevated against other mass-media means. Society tends to believe Anglo-Saxon mass-media because they trust the information presented by them. And it is also the Anglo-Saxon media that release the news promptly, tracking all the latest events, being ahead of all the news.

5. Research Methods

The empiric material determines the choice of the methods used for the analysis of the speech data. The selection of the material was carried out with the help of the methods of observation, comparison and description. The evaluation of the semantic, communicative and pragmatic peculiarities of the material under study was performed with the help of the methods of discursive, linguistic and pragmatic, linguistic and cultural, contextual analysis.

6. Findings

The first and foremost thing for common people is to comprehend the variety of terms which are used to describe gender identity. The American journal *The Time* released the article entitled *A Comprehensive Guide to Facebook’s New Options for Gender Identity* on February 14, 2014 (Steinmetz,

2014). The main aim of the article is to get the readers acquainted with *The Social Justice Advocate's Handbook: A Guide to Gender* by Sam Killermann. The book is characterized by the authors of the article under analysis as 'a tour of gender'. The conceptual metaphor employed here shows that gender issues are complex ones and it requires a lot of effort and background knowledge to get a clear idea of gender identity problems. The definition of 30 terms connected with gender identity is given in the article. The lexical unit *label* is very often used while defining these terms. The Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) describes this word in the following way: *a word or a phrase that is used to describe the characteristics or qualities of people, activities, or things, often in a way that is unfair*. Thus, the usage of the lexical unit *label* implies the fact that not all the terms exploited while speaking about gender identity are administered properly and reflect the true essence of things.

Whereas the article *A Comprehensive Guide to Facebook's New Options for Gender Identity* gives the definition of terms connected with transgender discourse, another material published in *The Time* on March 16, 2017 under the title *Beyond 'He' or 'She': the Changing Meaning of Gender and Sexuality* (Steinmetz, 2017) lets the readers see the usage of different transgender terms in context.

* *Sitting behind piles of rainbow-colored paper cranes – a hot fundraising item – the group leaders are counting the different identity labels they've encountered. Sure, there's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender. But there are more. Way more. "There are people who are pan," says 17-year-old club president Grace Mason, meaning pansexual. There's also aromantic, asexual, genderqueer, two-spirit and on and on.*

In this example we come across several terms used in the context of transgender discourse: *lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, pansexual, aromantic, asexual, genderqueer, two-spirit*. But the issue of terms used to describe people in the framework of transgender discourse is not the only one. What is more important is the identity of those who are "labelled" not in accordance with their feelings. In this connection social issues emerge on the agenda. One of them is the problem of laws that require single-user bathrooms to be marked as gender-neutral or "all-gender".

* *President Obama even established one (a law. – N.K., L.P., O.T.) at the White House, as his Administration instructed all federally funded schools to allow students to use facilities that correspond with their gender identity – guidance that President Trump's Administration rescinded (though he kept the bathroom).*

The question of gender-neutral bathrooms is just one of the topics to be discussed in connection with the transgender discourse. The latter encompasses a wide range of problems the most essential of which is the issue of the "other" when your identity doesn't coincide with your physical gender, when you feel different from your peers, when you don't possess enough means to express your gender perception.

* *About eight years ago Nick Teich, a 34-year-old transgender man, started the first summer camp in America for transgender youth. In recent years, he says, the organization has found more registrants checking the "other" box on their intake forms. "We have a growing number of kids who identify as genderqueer, nonbinary, gender variant. People put 'demigirl', 'genderless', 'no gender', 'all genders', 'pangender'," he says. "We get things all the time, and I'm like, 'What is this? I have to look this up'."*

In this case it's very important to listen to the voices who, if it's possible to put it in this way, represent the transgender discourse. The article under review represents the stories of 12 young boys and girls who speak about their gender identity.

* *Kyle Scotten, a 21-year-old from Texas who identifies as a gay man, says he did not come out until he went to college in part because attitudes were different even a few years ago.*

* *Sophie Vanderburgh, a 19-year-old college freshman in Maine, recently realized that she's attracted to women as well as men. Her older sibling came out as transgender two years ago, an experience that Vanderburgh says "made me a lot more sensitive to everything".*

* *"It's really easy to tell someone who is alone and doesn't feel like there are other people like them that who they are is wrong," says Jacob Tobia, a 25-year-old writer-producer in Los Angeles who identifies as genderqueer.*

"With younger people, I see a lot more of 'I have never had a gender'; 'Gender isn't me'; 'Gender just doesn't apply to me'; and 'Screw gender'," says McGwier, who identifies as queer and gender nonconforming.

* *K.C. Clements, a 28-year-old living in Brooklyn, says, "I identify as a white, able-bodied, queer, nonbinary trans person," Clements says. "It's a mouthful."*

* *Marie McGwier identifies as queer and gender nonconforming.*

* *Grace, who identifies as bisexual, believes that one's gender or sexuality can change over a lifetime.*

* *Growing up in a small, conservative Texas town, Kyle worried about coming out as gay, but he says that teenagers today are more empowered and more aware because of social media.*

* *As her senior year of high school drew to a close, Sophie realized that though she loved her boyfriend, she was physically drawn to women too. Now a college freshman, she identifies as bisexual and wishes people were more open-minded about sexuality as well as gender: "I don't understand why people are so attached to labels like female and male."*

K.C. has a long answer when asked how they identify – "a white, able-bodied, queer, nonbinary trans person" – and says that it has taken years of work to overcome expectations of a society "that can't really handle me." K.C. adds that "as a child, I felt very in-between."

* *Rowan, who identifies as gender fluid, says that watching politicians fight over which bathroom transgender people belong in is upsetting.*

* *As with many young people, Miguel's exploration of gender started with a Google search: "What does it mean to not identify as male or female?" Now that he's out as gender fluid, he is sometimes bullied at school, but he also finds acceptance: "People in my generation, if they hear something new, they're like, 'Oh, O.K.'"*

Thus, the question of gender identity is the vital issue especially for those who find themselves at an age between a child and an adult. Gender identity is closely connected with gender socialization and gender expression. Gender socialization describes the behavior which is considered appropriate for a given sex. Gender expression is how a person expresses his gender identity, e.g. through clothes, appearance and behavior. In the context of gender socialization and gender expression the topic of gender-dysphoric children is pushed on the agenda. The article under the title *Many Pediatricians Don't*

Know How to Handle Gender-Dysphoric Kids (Fetters, 2018) published in *The Atlantic* on June 26, 2018 tells a story of a 6-year-old kid Andrew.

* *Andrew, born with male anatomy, likes to play with dolls and makeup, and since age 3, Andrew has identified as a girl. When Andrew was 4, a pediatrician waved off this behavior as “just a phase.” Two years later, though, Andrew’s parents are beginning to wonder if they’ve been “oppressing” their child. They notice Andrew is happiest at home, where they allow Andrew to wear dresses. Out of the house, the 6-year-old is starting to withdraw socially and dread going to school.*

The article runs about the vital role of pediatricians for gender-nonconforming people who are at a high risk of depression and suicide.

* *Youth gender specialists across the country believe one of the most common obstacles standing between kids with gender dysphoria or gender-identity questions and the care that would set them up for their best possible health outcomes are unhelpful primary-care pediatricians.*

Geographical factor also influences the quality of gender-dysphoric children’s treatment.

* *Gender-dysphoria and transgender-issues training for pediatricians seems especially critical in states like New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana, where, according to a 2014 map released by the Human Rights Campaign and the medical journal *Pediatric Annals*, clinical-care programs for transgender and gender-nonconforming youth are so few and far between that they’re virtually inaccessible to most.*

In general, the overall tone of mass-media publications can be described as the one advocating “children transgender revolution”. Mass-media form a positive image of the families where children change their gender at four years already. But still there are those who oppose the idea of performing transgender operations to children of a very young age. The British newspaper *The Telegraph* on March 7, 2019 published the article under the title *NHS Transgender Clinic accused of covering negative impacts of Puberty Blockers on Children* by Oxford Professor (Tominey, 2019).

* *An Oxford University professor has accused the NHS’s only specialised clinic for transgender children of suppressing negative results while undertaking experimental treatment on adolescents. Dr Michael Biggs, an associate professor at Oxford’s Department of Sociology claims the Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS) has been giving puberty blocking hormones to children, without robust evidence as to the long-term effects. <...> Declaring the trial a success, the clinic has continued to treat over a thousand children with the hormones but Dr Biggs’ research suggests that after a year of treatment “a significant increase” was found in patients who had been born female self-reporting to staff that they “deliberately try to hurt or kill myself”.*

The movement which protects the rights of the children in the matters of changing their biological sex got the name anti-transgender campaign. One of the heads of this campaign is Jeffrey Younger. He fights with his ex-wife who makes their son, aged 6, live as a transgender girl. The American conservative media company *The Blaze* published the material under the title *Texas Dad’s Update on Nightmare Custody Fight with Ex-Wife who Makes Their Son, 6, Live as a Transgender Girl* (Urbanski, 2019).

* *Younger said issues with the way his wife was treating James commenced over three years ago when he complained she would lock him in his room and say things like “the monsters only eat boys”.*

Since their divorce, Younger said his ex-wife socially transitioned James and gave him a new name – Luna – which his teachers use. James, now 6, also dresses as a girl and uses the girls' restroom at school – and soon may be headed to hormone transitioning. Thing is, Younger said James told him he isn't a girl and “violently refuses to dress as girl at my house”. But regardless, Younger said his ex-wife not only is on the path toward forcing Dad to accept James' transition to female – and pay for things like a transgender-affirming therapist and hormone treatments and other procedures – but also to remove custody rights such as overnight visitation. And all with the blessing of the courts.

It is a vivid example of confronting not only a family member by the whole propaganda system which is able to “destroy” anyone who disagrees with it. Mario Lopez, an American actor and entertainment journalist, is one more person who suffered from this propaganda machine. On July 31, 2019 *The Washington Times* published the article under the title *Mario Lopez under Fire for Trans Kids Comments: ‘I Just Think about the Repercussions Later On’* (Chasmar, 2019).

** Radio host and father of three Mario Lopez is facing criticism for comments he made about young transgender children and the emotional “repercussions” they could face later on in life. Mario Lopez made the comments during an interview with former Turning Point USA director Candace Owens on her eponymous radio show for PragerU in June, but the comments are just now making the rounds on social media. Mario Lopez’s name became a top trending topic on Twitter on Wednesday morning. During the interview, Ms. Owens criticized the “weird” trend out of Hollywood where celebrities are supposedly raising their children genderless or allowing them to “pick” their gender. Ms. Owens called it a kind of “narcissism” among Hollywood parents that sees them competing to see who can be the most tolerant.*

Mario Lopez was really under attack after his utterances, he nearly lost his job, he was boycotted by his colleagues and accused of transphobia. The latter is defined as a negative attitude or feeling toward transgender or transsexual people. The media representation of this social phenomenon could become the subject of scientific research in a separate paper.

7. Conclusion

Thus, the analysis of the media coverage of transgender discourse lets us come to the following conclusions. The mass-media give the readers an excellent opportunity to get a full picture of transgender problems which are inseparable from a broad social context and their linguistic representation. A great number of terms is used to describe people whose biological sex doesn't coincide with their gender identity. Gender identity is closely connected with gender socialization and gender expression. Children transgender revolution is thoroughly covered by the Anglo-Saxon mass-media, sometimes even the problem is exaggerated. Those who advocate the so-called ‘anti-transgender’ campaign are attacked and boycotted. The reason of that may be seen in the society's attitude towards sex and gender. In today's world with the abundance of social networks the very idea of gender is levelled and turned off. The social networks' users may not announce their gender and very often the gender of their peers remains anonymous. Such a wide coverage of transgender discourse in the mass-media serves as a kind of compensation for lacking social gender identity. The role of school, parents, social services in this case is

to help children find the right balance between knowing who you are and accepting your real gender identity.

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