

# “The social deixis of gender boundaries: person naming practices in Croatian”

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In this paper, I will examine the multi-layered role of language as a dominant social institution in shaping and normalising a social order based on gender as the actual “opiate of the masses” (Goffman 1977: 315), showing a remarkable amount of inflexibility in many linguistic contexts. Developing on Verschueren’s (2015: 796) concept of gendered references as “absolute social deixis”, this lecture will introduce a set of linguistic material examining the rules, conventions and effects of gendered naming practices in Croatian. Despite the apparent impossibility to avoid gendered naming practices in the Croatian context, alternative language use by Croatian gender and LGBT activists will be analysed in order to show possibilities of overcoming the linguistically based gender boundaries.

Presenting the results of different studies on the relation of gender and language use, this lecture will deal with questions such as: How have naming practices in Croatian been prescribed by grammars of the last fifty years with regard to strictly defined social gender concepts? How have people been named in a leading national newspaper (*Vjesnik*) over the last years? Do traditional and non-traditional naming practices effect peoples’ gendered conceptualisations differently? How do people concerned about gender equality use the Croatian language in order to avoid sexist and biased language use? The methods used for studying these issues range from diachronic, qualitative and quantitative analyses of (newspaper and grammatical) texts, to the quantitative analysis of online questionnaires, up to the qualitative content analysis of expert interviews in Croatian.

The results presented in this lecture show very clearly that there is a history of vivid and highly political discussions on traditional naming practices in Croatia, that gendered naming practices have become a national marker for Croatian vis-à-vis Serbian in the last decades, and, last but not least, how very steady not only social boundaries but also the corresponding linguistic traditions are, despite their apparently potential to have limiting effects on people.