



Prof. Jadwiga Linde-Usiekniewicz

works at the Faculty of Polish Studies, University of Warsaw, specializing in general linguistics and sign linguistics. Her work focuses on the relationship between semantics, syntax, and pragmatics.
jlindeus@uw.edu.pl

The Case for Feminatives in Polish

Jadwiga Linde-Usiekniewicz

Faculty of Polish Studies, University of Warsaw

In languages like Polish, in which all nouns are marked for grammatical gender, “feminatives” are distinctively feminine forms of nouns, particularly those referring to humans, derived from grammatically masculine forms. In English, where nouns are generally not marked for gender, there are relatively few feminatives (e.g. “actress,” “stewardess”).

The linguistic rules and customs governing the use of Polish masculine and feminine forms are rather complex. In the case of plurals, if a group of individuals includes both male and female members, the plural of the masculine form can be used. This means that a plural expression such as *czytelnicy* “readers” (plural of *czytelnik* “(male) reader”) is ambiguous: it may refer to a group of only men, or to all readers irrespective of gender. On the other hand, for a mixed-gender group a split construction may be used: *czytelnicy i czytelniczki* “men and women readers,” where the masculine form would refer to men readers only.

Similarly, a singular grammatically masculine nouns have traditionally been used to refer to a non-specific individual, without indicating gender: e.g. *pacjent ma prawo do...* “the patient has the right to...” Again, such a use is ambiguous, either referring only to men patients, or to any patients irrespective of gender.

Linguistic customs shift over time, as people’s notions of what is correct or appropriate change. In English, feminine forms are seen by some as belittling and so are getting less often used (cf. “actor” and “flight attendant”). In Polish, in the interwar period, women members of parliament were both referred to by explicit feminine forms with the suffix *-ka*: *posłanka* “woman MP” derived from *poseł* “MP,” whereas the post-WWII decades saw a massive shift towards using grammatically masculine nouns with reference to women, for example *Maria Nowak jest posełem*. “Ms Maria Nowak is an MP.” In other grammatical contexts and in titles masculine-like forms were used, which formally resemble masculine nouns and are marked as feminine by the absence of inflection for case and number, and with feminine marking on any adjective, e.g. *Maria Nowak, nowa poseł* “Ms Maria Nowak, a new-FEM MP,” or *Pani poseł* “Madame MP.” The suffixed feminine forms came to be deemed belittling to women and relegated to informal register.

As happens in other languages that have grammatical masculine and feminine genders, the attempt to introduce, or as the case of Polish, reintroduce explicitly feminine forms in formal discourse has met with strong

opposition from the more conservative-minded parts of the public. They argue that masculine forms are generic and can refer perfectly well to any individual, irrespective of their gender, and that new forms are awkward and constitute an unnecessary innovation that litters the language.

The trouble is, contrary to what is assumed by more conservative users of Polish, generic masculine forms are not gender-neutral, and tend to be interpreted as referring only to men. Psycholinguistic research has shown that technically ambiguous uses of grammatically masculine nouns are often interpreted as referring only to men, which in turn affects how the audiences understand the messages in question and in consequence perceive the social world. For example, young girls are likely to think that they cannot *zostać lekarzami* “become doctors” – even though such masculine plural forms have an inclusive, cross-gender reading, the all-male reading still exerts a powerful influence. What can be done here? Often paired plurals including a feminine can be used for greater precision and better comprehensibility, *lekarki i lekarze* “women and men doctors” (as in the “readers” example above). Similarly, using an explicit feminine with reference to a specific woman, e.g. *wybitna naukowczyni* “a distinguished woman academic” does not imply that she is distinguished among women academics only and not among all academics, but shows – if it still needs to be shown – that women are capable of any achievement.

In recent decades, more and more Polish women prefer to be referred to by distinctly feminine nouns – a survey from 2011 showed this to be the preference of roughly half of female respondents. However, there is ongoing debate as to which feminine forms are most appropriate and aesthetic. Given that the *-ka* suffix can sometimes seem colloquial or too reminiscent of diminutives, another way of forming explicit feminatives has gained some currency in recent years. These relatively newer coinages include *ministra* “female minister” (instead of *ministerka*) and *profesora* “female professor” (in lieu of *profesorka*). Such forms have their advocates, but on the other hand, some other users of Polish perceive them as having a negative, augmentative connotation, and therefore feel uncomfortable with them. No doubt, these usage preferences will see continued shifts in the coming years.

In any case, in 2019 the Council for the Polish Language encouraged the broader use of feminine forms: “there is a need for greater symmetry of masculine and feminine personal nouns in Polish language (...). The use of feminatives (...) is a sign that speakers feel the need to increase the visibility of women in language and texts.” Moreover, usage guides are increasingly recommending that the preferences of female addressees, if known, should be taken into account when it comes to the use of feminine forms. That, it seems, is good advice. ■