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***JA ES BŪTU SMUKS, ES GRIBĒTU BŪT MEITENE!* (‘IF I WERE
PRETTY, I WOULD LIKE TO BE A GIRL!’). DEBATING
TRANSSEXUALISM IN THE LATVIAN PARLIAMENT**

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***Abstract:** The article investigates a debate on the issues of legal recognition of gender which took place in the Latvian Parliament in 2009 and which is considered a rich source of material for a two-fold analysis. As an example of gendered discourse, it shows the differences between female and male MPs’ ways of tackling this uncomfortable subject. As a discourse about gender, which allows one to study the speakers’ arguments and attitudes, it reveals prejudice, lack of knowledge and conservative thinking. The analysis thus illustrates the language and arguments employed in the public sphere when discussing face-threatening, taboo topics.*

***Keywords:** debates, gender, Latvian, parliamentary discourse, sociolinguistics, transsexualism.*

1. Introduction

The present article examines a debate that took place in the Latvian Parliament in November 2009 concerning proposed amendments to the Sexual and Reproductive Health Law. The debate, which focused on the issues of legal recognition of gender, constitutes the only occasion to date when Latvian parliamentarians have discussed anything connected with the problems of transsexual/transgender citizens of their country. Thus it remains the sole source of material for a study of the language and arguments used by Latvian politicians to discuss transsexual/transgender issues. The relevance of such a study may be confirmed by current events taking place in Latvia and other post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

In Latvia's neighbouring country of Lithuania, for example, five anti-gay and anti-trans draft laws are presently being considered, including a ban on all sex reassignment surgery and therapy. In addition, there are no procedures for change of name and gender marker in identification and other documents. In Poland, sex reassignment surgery is only possible in practice after a declaratory judgement from a court allowing the change of name and gender marker has been issued (EUFRA 2008:128); and in order to receive such a statement a complicated judicial procedure is required in the course of which the applicant must file a court petition against their own parents (Trans-Fuzja 2014:4).

In Latvia itself, "the availability of gender reassignment medical operations is not regulated by law, which may create a risk of abuse, and may in addition be in violation of [Latvia's] obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights" (EUFRA 2008:128). Astonishingly, proof of having undergone at least some such operations (to be precise, proof of sterility) is required before a change of name and gender marker in

identification documents can be achieved. Applicants are additionally required to be single, which constitutes another violation of their human rights.

Under such conditions, it appears useful to examine the language and argumentation employed to discuss transsexual/transgender issues in the public sphere. Despite the passage of time, the anti-gay and anti-trans arguments have not changed, and these need to be identified and analysed carefully in order to be challenged and countered effectively.

2. Debating Transsexualism in the Latvian Parliament

2.1. The Concept of Gender

“Gender is not something we are born with, and not something we have, but something we do, something we perform” – write Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003:10). It is not something we do or perform alone, either — it emerges through our interaction with others, from attributions by others (Sunderland & Litosseliti 2002). These claims seem to apply especially to transsexual/transgender persons whose chosen or performed gender does not comply with the sex they were assigned at birth. These individuals have to “consciously work at achieving and securing [their] gender identity status” (Weatherall & Gallois 2003:488). And while the concept of performativity, coined by Butler in 1990, has been very enlightening in gender studies, in this case it may seem a double-edged sword, suggesting that the gender they do or perform is temporary, theatrical or less “real”. It seems difficult to reconcile the performative understanding of identity with legal reality, a domain in which such data as name, surname, date of birth or gender are considered unchangeable and objective givens.

Still, growing pressure from various interest groups and communities means that the issue of the legal status of transsexual/ transgender persons cannot be disregarded at the political level any longer. This question, which has ceased to be a private or intimate matter, must be tackled in the public sphere. But the problem is not only how to resolve this issue by means of legal acts. In a relatively conservative society such as Latvia, there seems to be no language to even just talk about it. Marriage is constitutionally defined here as a union between a man and a woman and the level of social tolerance towards LGBT persons remains low. There has never been an openly gay (let alone trans) MP in Latvia, and Latvian members of the European Parliament are reportedly the most homophobic (along with Polish, Lithuanian and Italian members).

Discussing the topic of legal gender recognition on the political scene must thus have been extremely threatening to the social face (defined by Goffman in *Interaction Ritual* as the positive social value a person effectively claims for him-/herself) of Latvian MPs. It may then be assumed that the speakers would be more concerned with protecting their image as individuals than with reaching beyond stereotypical frameworks of talking about transsexualism and contributing to an informed and objective debate.

2.2. The Framework of Parliamentary Discourse Analysis

A parliamentary debate is a specific genre of political discourse, characterized by its combined monologic and dialogic nature (Chojnicka 2012). It consists of turns whereby speakers react to previous turns and anticipate following turns (features of dialogue); however, each turn is also a speech, independent and interpretable on its own (monologue). Parliamentary debate participants are expected to speak from the footing

(defined by Goffman in *Forms of Talk* (1981) as an alignment, a relationship between the roles taken by speakers and hearers of public persons, politicians, legislators, members of political parties and parliamentary groups rather than as private individuals. Thus, in principle they should voice opinions based on the ideology adopted by their party rather than on their personal experiences and views, and the discussion as a whole should be characterized by official and formal language and behaviour and lack of emotional involvement.

The debate under scrutiny is worth studying because it is concerned with an extremely face-threatening, taboo topic. Under such circumstances, speakers may find it difficult to discuss it objectively and rationally. They are expected to protect their social face by using stereotypical, traditional, uninspired frames (in order not to risk sounding suspiciously well-informed or liberal, perhaps), irony, and similar devices.

Moreover, this debate appears to be a rich source of material for a study of a two-fold relationship between talk and gender. First, it is a *gendered* talk whereby female and male MPs deal with the face-threatening topic in various ways. Second, it is explicit talk *on gender* – speakers' views are *presented*, not *marked* or *coded* in discourse. When compared with other studies on the relationship of language and gender, here the order is reversed: it is not discourse on other subjects that reveals attitudes to, and ideologies regarding, gender, but the discourse on gender reveals underlying ideologies of a much broader scale.

The present study is thus embedded in a kind of combined framework of qualitative methods associated with (critical) political discourse analysis and sociolinguistics. Its objective is two-fold: a sociolinguistic account of gendered discourse, showing the differences

between the way female and male speakers behaved and expressed themselves in a face-threatening situation; and a critical analysis of discourse about gender, exposing the speakers' ideologies through the study of their arguments and attitudes.

The study is based on an audio recording and a transcript of the debate, available on the Internet website of the Latvian Parliament (<http://saeima.lv/lv/par-saeimu/arhivs>).

2.3. The Debate – General Information

The debate in question took place in the Latvian *Saeima* on November 12th, 2009. It concerned amendments to the Sexual and Reproductive Health Law prepared and submitted by the Ministry of Justice for the first reading. The proposal concerned the legal status of transsexual/transgender persons and suggested legal recognition of the declared gender on the basis of a diagnosis issued by a commission of five doctors of medicine and the person's firm wish to change gender. Such a formulation of law would result in a possible discrepancy between the person's physical appearance and their legally recognized gender.

A terminological note seems necessary here. Throughout the debate, parliamentarians consistently used the term *transseksuālisms* and the adjective *transseksuāls* ('transsexualism', 'transsexual') – the corresponding 'gender' derivatives (i.e. 'transgenderism', 'transgender') were never employed. It should be acknowledged, however, that according to recent terminological conventions the debate actually concerned legal recognition of transgenderism, not transsexualism. 'Transgender' is an umbrella term that refers to individuals who challenge socially constructed gender identities without necessarily wishing to alter their physical appearance

(SRS). The amendments discussed by Latvian parliamentarians would have enabled identification documents to reflect social, not physical/biological gender (with or without SRS). This means that even though the level of knowledge of transsexual/transgender issues among the Latvian MPs seemed insufficient for them to actually debate them (as discussed in this paper), the legal solutions proposed were very progressive, based on the modern understanding of gender as a socially constructed category. For this reason, it is regrettable that after a short debate of half an hour the project was dismissed.

Table 1. below summarizes the debate by showing the number of turns, names of turn contributors, their gender (F – female and M – male), whether they spoke for or against and whether they voted for or against the amendments. Note that three MPs spoke for a second time (turns [8], [11] and [12]).

turn no.	name of speaker	F/M	spoke for/against	voted for/against
[1]	I. Feldmane	F	against	against
[2]	L. Liepiņa	F	for	for
[3]	I. Šlesere	F	against	against
[4]	J. Strazdiņš	M	against	against
[5]	Dz. Rasnačs	M	against	abstained
[6]	O. Kastēns	M	for (ironically)	against
[7]	J. Dobelis	M	against	against
[8]	L. Liepiņa	F	for (2)	

[9]	A. Bērziņš	M	against	against
[10]	Dz. Ābiķis	M	for	for
[11]	I. Šlesere	F	against (2)	
[12]	J. Strazdiņš	M	against (2)	
[13]	A. Seile	F	- (see example (2))	for
[14]	V. Ģīlis	M	for (on behalf of committee)	against

Table 1. Summary of the debate under investigation

The table shows that most contributors spoke against the amendments – only one woman and one man spoke in favour of them (the former twice). The table also shows a high level of consistency between speaking for/against and voting for/against, although there are interesting exceptions. At first sight, turn [6] would appear to speak in favour of the amendments – it actually contains words of encouragement to support them:

(1) *Tāpēc tos, kas balso „par” sportu, lūdzu atbalstīt šo priekšlikumu.* [6]

So I am asking those who vote “for” sport to support this draft law.

Upon closer examination, however, the ironic tone of voice of the speaker and the fact that he voted against the proposal prove that this encouragement was not meant literally. It is also an interesting case in point for the claim that irony “conventionally signifies that [utterances] are to be taken in reverse” (Grice 1989:53).

Similarly confusing may be turn [13], in which the speaker seems to be questioning the point of discussing legal recognition of gender – clearly considered insignificant – when other, more serious problems are pressing:

(2) Tik ārkārtīgi nopietnā jautājumā, kad mēs apspriežam arī budžetu, es brīnos, ka neviens no runātājiem nav ierosinājis izveidot komisiju, kurā būtu pārstāvis no katras politiskās partijas, lai noteiktu dzimumu. Bet varbūt tikai no koalīcijas partijām - arī tāds variants varētu būt. Un tāpēc es iesaku pilnīgi brīvu balsojumu, lai mēs saprastu, kas ir kas. [13]

In this extremely serious matter, when we are also discussing the budget, I am surprised that not one of the speakers has proposed the creation of a committee in which there would be one representative from each political party to establish gender. But maybe only from the coalition parties – there could also be such a variant. And that is why I suggest an absolutely free vote so that we understand who is what.

Having uttered such an ironical statement, with the apparent objective of undermining the legitimacy of the issue at hand, the speaker still voted for the amendments.

Also perplexing is the fact that the person who introduced the draft law on behalf of the responsible committee and expressed the committee's support for it (example below) still voted against it.

(3) Tātad uzlabot viennozīmīgi to var, bet šobrīd komisijas lēmums bija atbalstīt konkrēto likumprojektu virzīšanai uz Saeimas balsojumu. [14]

So it could clearly be improved, but at the moment the committee's decision was to move the given draft law for voting in the Parliament.

What we see here is a discrepancy between the speaker's footing as the responsible committee's representative and their footing as a member of

parliament with the right to vote according to their own beliefs and opinions. Other discrepancies in footing will be discussed in 2.6. below.

2.4. The Debate – Sociolinguistic Information

As Table 1. shows, the debate was characterized by an almost even distribution of voices between men and women (seven to six, respectively, excluding the speech on behalf of the committee) and an unusually active participation by women (taking into account that women constituted only about twenty per cent of the Latvian Parliament). Although the overall number of turns was not high, certain differences between the way women and men participated in the discussion may still be observed.

The first difference is the use of what may provisionally be called ‘protective devices’, illustrated by the following examples:

(4) *Es nebūtu runājusi par šo tēmu, taču uzskatu, ka jums, kas balsos, ir jāzina šā likumprojekta būtība un saturs, lai varētu balsot pēc savas pārlicības.* [1]
I would not speak on this subject, but I believe that you who are going to vote need to know the essence and content of this draft law in order to vote according to your convictions.

(5) *Es arī nebiju plānojusi debatēt.* [3]
I also wasn't going to speak in the debate.

These examples seem to suggest that it was important for their authors to distance themselves from the subject and emphasize that they had nothing to do with it, as if talking about transsexualism would stigmatize them as transsexual (see Goffman 1963). I would argue that they reflect a kind of double footing of the speakers – as private individuals, protecting themselves from possible stigmatization, and as members of parliament,

fulfilling the obligations associated with this public function. Protective devices of this kind were only found in women's speeches – they were not used by men at all.

Another gender-related difference is the use of irony, illustrated in examples (1) and (2) above. In general, men seem to speak ironically slightly more often than women, and they show a preference for jocularity – a teasing and humorous kind of irony, e.g.:

(6) *Cienītie kolēģi! Tā kā es netaisos mainīt savu dzimumu, centīšos runāt objektīvi.* [7]

Honourable colleagues! As I do not intend to change my sex, I will try to speak objectively.

(7) *Šis likumprojekts, tāds, kāds tas ir pirmajā lasījumā, noteikti tiks labots, pārlabots un arī kastrēts.* [7]

This draft law, the way it is now in the first reading, will definitely be changed, corrected and also castrated.

Both utterances expose a kind of dismissive, trivializing and not very “politically correct” attitude. Women, on the other hand, seem to prefer sarcasm – a more hostile and aggressive type of irony; cf. the following very emotional and judgmental utterance:

(8) *Sanāk kopā divi psihiatri, urologs, ginekologs un dzemdību speciālists un nolemj: jā, šī persona ir sieviete vai šī persona ir vīrietis, jo viņa ir izteikusi tādu vēlmi, un šī vēlme jau viņam ir pusgadu.* [3]

Two psychiatrists, a urologist, a gynaecologist and a birth specialist come together and decide: yes, this person is a woman or this person is a man, because she has expressed such a desire, and this desire has already lasted half a year.

This kind of sarcastic mini-narrative was used only once in the debate under scrutiny, but it is not uncommon in the discourse of Latvian parliamentary debates in general (Chojnicka 2012). It seems that this strategy is resorted to in cases when the speaker has “run out of words”, when she or he is frustrated because no other argument has worked.

Men’s preference for non-serious jocularity and women’s inclination towards grim sarcasm overall reflect typical attitudes towards the topic: the former’s predilection for trivialization and the latter’s – for dramatization. Women often speak under the influence of powerful emotions, with their voices breaking, many repetitions and false starts, and strong evaluative phrases (e.g. *mani ārkārtīgi izbrīna* ‘I am extremely astonished’, *tas ir absurds* ‘this is absurd’) instead of substantiated arguments. They also have a tendency to try to control and correct the direction of the discussion (e.g. *tā nav vienkārši procedūra* ‘it is not merely a procedure’, *jautājums nav par sportu* ‘the question is not about sport’) and to “reprimand” others for their less serious attitudes:

(9) *Man liekas, ka ir viegli ironizēt par dažiem jautājumiem. Ir! Bet vai tur ir vietā piesaukt ētiku tajā pašā laikā? To es stipri apšaubu. Šiem cilvēkiem, man liekas, nenāk smiekli, klausoties tādas runas.* [8]

It seems to me that it is easy to be ironical on some issues. Indeed! But is it then in place to invoke ethics at the same time? I strongly doubt it. To those people it is not funny, I think, to listen to such talk.

Men’s tendency towards jocularity and looser discipline – note how “opening up the stage” for jokes in turn [5] almost excluded the further participation of women – may point to their unusual agitation and excitement. The fact that male MPs were more likely to interrupt the

speaker holding the floor – out of fifteen interruption whose authors could be identified, twelve were men – also supports this conclusion (a section on interruptions will follow).

Other gender-related differences will be mentioned when the parliamentarians' arguments are analyzed in the following sections.

2.5. Individual vs. Collective Well-Being Perspective

Having discussed the debate as a case of *gendered* discourse, we may now turn to the critical analysis of the argumentation employed throughout its course as discourse *about gender*. To start with, consider the following example:

(10) *Latvijā atkal tiek proponētas pārprastas cilvēktiesības – personas vēlme, nevis veselīgi domājoša sabiedrība.* [1]

Yet again misinterpreted human rights are being proposed in Latvia – a person's wish, not a healthy thinking society.

In this fragment, two different approaches to human rights are contrasted – the individual well-being perspective ('a person's wish') and the collective (social) well-being perspective ('a healthy thinking society'). The speaker clearly gives preference to the latter, emphasizing that the needs of society are more important than individual, personal needs, and that human rights should protect society as a whole.

This is one of the prevailing features of argumentation in the debate – adopting either the individual or the collective well-being perspective to argue for or against the amendments. In one case these perspectives are even combined:

(11) [*problēmu cilvēka psihē nevar ārstēt ar cilvēka ķermeņa kroplošanu un dokumentu maiņu,*] [*tā nodarot lielu kaitējumu visās sabiedrības garīgajai veselībai un sagraujot visu lietu dabisko kārtību*] [1]
 [a problem in a person's psyche cannot be treated by mutilating their body and making a change in the documents,] [thus causing great damage to the spiritual health of the whole of society and destroying the natural order of all things]

This example contains arguments against the amendments from both the individual (within the first square brackets) and the collective (second square brackets) well-being point of view.

Applying this distinction makes it possible to map the distribution of “for” and “against” arguments according to the perspective adopted and the speaker's gender, as can be seen in the table below. This shows that the only argument in favour of the draft law which adopted one of the two perspectives came from a female speaker and was based on the individual well-being standpoint (example (9) above; cf. also example (8) for an argument “against” from this standpoint). It also demonstrates that the collective well-being perspective could only be adopted to speak against the amendments.

	individual		collective	
	for	against	for	against
F	+	+	-	+
M	-	+	-	+

Table 2. Distribution of “for” and “against” arguments according to the perspective adopted and the speaker's gender

The individual and collective well-being perspectives were also adopted to discuss practical problems associated with legal recognition of opposite gender. The problem that could affect the individual well-being of a transgender person pertains to the discrepancy between their appearance and what is stated in their identification documents:

(12) ir iespējama situācija, ka persona, kura būs Latvijā juridiski noformējusi dzimuma maiņu, piemēram, lidostā uzrādīs pasi, kurā būs minēts viens dzimums, bet faktiski realitātē izskatīsies kā pretējā dzimuma pārstāvis. [1]

it is possible that a person who has legally changed their sex in Latvia will show their passport, for example at an airport, with information about one sex, but in fact, in reality, they will appear as a representative of the other sex.

This is a valid point; however, this problem already exists today, only in a reversed form, in the case of people who make themselves look like representatives of the other gender while their documents indicate their actual (original) biological sex. Such argumentation is thus a kind of smokescreen that hides the real problem of the prevalent binary perception of gender distinction which has failed to keep up with the times.

There is one issue associated with collective well-being which is only discussed by men: the domain of professional sport. All the arguments of this type are against the draft law (including the ironic example (1) above) and many of them are jocular, pointing to male MPs' lack of understanding of this growing global concern and ethical problem:

(13) Olimpiskajās spēlēs jau ir bijuši pirmie skandāli, jo fiziski viņi jau nemainīsies, bet viņi konkurēs ar pārējiem sportistiem pilnīgi citā līmenī nekā tās pašas[...][Ja viņš, piemēram, uz sieviešu dzimumu sevi pārvērtīs, tad tas vairs nebūs godīgs sports. [4]

There have already been the first scandals in the Olympic Games, as they will not change physically, but they will compete with other sportswomen on a completely different level than their own [...] if he, for example, changes gender into a female, it will no longer be an honest sport.

(14) *tādā veidā, teiksim, Latvijas sportistes, kas iepriekš ir bijuši vīrieši, varētu ļoti sekmīgi nest un pārstāvēt Latvijas vārdu starptautiskajā sporta arēnā.* [6]

in such a way, let's say, Latvian sportswomen, who used to be men, could very effectively carry and represent the name of Latvia on the international sports arena.

By focusing on the marginal possibility of men changing their gender in order to compete in sports with “real” women, the speakers completely ignore the prevalent goal of MtF transition – to live in accordance with one's true identity. Such arguments seem to suggest that no law which could potentially be abused should be adopted (in practice this would mean no new laws at all). They also trivialize the experience of most transsexual/transgender persons and reduce it to a laughing matter, a topic for jokes.

It may be mentioned here that this lack of understanding and this high level of prejudice, lapsing into trivialization (mainly in the case of men) or hostility (mainly in the case of women), are visible throughout the debate. Transsexualism is predominantly regarded as a mental disorder, ‘an aberration from the norm’ (*novirze no normas*), and associated with ‘mental abnormalities’ (*psihiskās novirzes*) and ‘abnormal desires’ (*tieksmju novirzes*). It is even bracketed together with ‘pyromania, dipsomania, dromomania, kleptomania’ ([4]). Examples (8) and (10) above also indicate that transsexualism is considered a ‘choice’, a mere ‘wish’ that could change at any moment; the neologism ‘pseudo-problem’ (*pseudoproblēma*, turn [1]) confirms that it is not taken seriously.

Even the female MP who was the only one to speak unambiguously in favour of the draft law repeatedly refers to transsexualism as a ‘problem’:

(15) *Parasti tā ir problēma no dzimšanas. Un jau Bībelē ir aprakstīta šī problēma, kur ir teikts, ka, piemēram, laimīgi var būt tie cilvēki, kuriem nav šīs problēmas.*

[2]

Usually this is a problem dating back to birth. And this problem was already described in the Bible, where it is said that, for example, happy may be the people who do not have this problem.

The individual vs collective perspective is also applicable to the scope of reference of the word *problēma*: in example (15) it refers to the identity problem of an individual person, but it may also refer to transsexual/transgender persons posing a problem to the entire society.

2.6. Interruptions

The emotionally charged character of the debate could be seen not only in the discomfort of the speakers as reflected in raised voices, false starts, repetitions and other faults in speech flow, but also in the unusually high number of interruptions from the audience (eighteen to be precise), coupled with an almost complete lack of reaction from the Chairperson, who only banged on the table to silence the audience once and verbally asked for silence once. Since interruptions from the audience are forbidden under the Rules of Procedure, an average debate in the Latvian Parliament contains far fewer interruptions combined with a much more reactive approach on the part of the Chairperson.

For this reason, it seems important to analyse not only the debate itself, but also the interruptions. While officially holding the floor, speakers

were restricted in expressing their actual opinions and beliefs by their footing as public speakers, statesmen, representatives of their political parties, etc. (cf. example (3) and following discussion). As we have seen, the debate focused on possible effects on personal and social health, ethical issues and practical problems arising from introducing the proposed amendments, and with a few exceptions was actually quite “politically correct”. The reason for this state of affairs could be the speakers’ fear of losing face and, as a result, the support of their voters. It is the unofficial and theoretically unrestricted discourse of interruptions or interjections that truly reveals the speakers’ attitudes and intentions.

For example, after the third female speaker had taken the floor, a male MP shouted from the back:

(16) *Sievietes sāk cīnīties savā starpā!*

Women are starting to fight with each other!

This utterance obviously refers to the notion of a “cat fight”, which seems to be a visualization sexually attractive to men and something they commonly associate with lesbians. At the same time, it trivializes the participation of women in a discussion, making it appear insignificant.

The following example, which gave rise to the title of this paper, trivializes the whole issue of transsexualism/transgenderism, reducing it to the level of appearance, physical attractiveness:

(17) *Ja es būtu smuks, es gribētu būt meitene!*

If I were pretty, I would like to be a girl!

A similar reduction to the level of physical strength and performance was noted when MPs were discussing the relation of transsexualism to sport; see examples (1), (13) and (14).

A scientific account of the differences between male and female bodies provoked the following interruption, which again trivializes and reduces the significance of the problem to the purely sexual level, completely ignoring its emotional aspects:

(18) *[viņam pat ūdens par desmit procentiem visā ķermenī ir vairāk nekā sievietes organismā]* [12]

Kurā vietā?

[a man even has ten per cent more water in his body than there is in a woman's]

In which place?

The next example is especially interesting in the light of Latvia's ethnic situation. For a small country, Latvia has a considerable number of ethnic minorities, especially of Russian origin (27.8% in data from 2009, according to the CIA World Factbook (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/lg.html>, last consulted in April 2012)). When Latvia belonged to the Soviet Union, a period still referred to by many Latvians as the Soviet occupation, Russians used to enjoy a privileged social status. This association was used by one of the MPs of Russian origin in a kind of self-ironizing manner at a point when his ideological "opponent" was speaking:

(19) *Seksuālā okupācija!*

Sexual occupation!

This comment, by referring to the motif taken up in Parliament over and over again, seems to convey the “broken record” effect (“how long can one talk about occupation?” translates to “how long can one talk about a similarly absurd issue?”). But it also, like all the other interruptions quoted above, makes the issue appear trivial and insignificant, unworthy of serious debate.

3. Conclusions

The debate has proved to be a rich source of material for analysis of both gendered discourse and discourse about gender. As a *gendered* discourse, it has shown, for example, that female parliamentarians tended to express their initial reluctance to speak on the subject and were more passionate and hostile, while male deputies were unusually agitated, interrupting speakers who held the floor and frequently making jokes. Female use of protective devices (examples (4) and (5)) and hostility on the one hand, and the jocularity and trivialization typical of men’s speeches on the other, may reflect the differences in how women and men try to protect their social face when discussing a taboo topic.

As a discourse *about gender*, through the study of speakers’ arguments and attitudes, it has revealed prejudice (transsexualism as a threat to the natural order of things or to social health, as an aberration from the norm), lack of knowledge (transsexualism as a choice or wish, reduced to the aspects of physical appearance/performance) and conservative thinking (gender distinction as a binary opposition, society’s needs as more important than individual needs).

Both approaches expose the topic of gender non-conformity as a face-threatening taboo, making it impossible for the speakers to reach out of

the frame of stereotypical thinking, possibly for fear of losing popularity or simply due to personal discomfort. Only one speaker made the effort to try to understand the situation of transgender persons, although her approach was driven by a condescending kind of pity “normals” have for the cursed, the stigmatized (Goffman 1963).

The analysis has revealed a conservative, traditional ideological approach to gender that informs Latvian MPs’ arguments and attitudes. In this approach, a person must be unambiguously classified either as man or as woman, as illustrated by example (12). Example (18) demonstrates a biological understanding of sex (gender). The understanding of gender as a socially constructed category is rejected.

Another conclusion of the analysis is that any discussion about gender, even concerning its legal aspects (which should be as neutral, objective and theoretical as possible in order to embrace any conceivable case and to exclude bias), is embedded in a network of other aspects of social life. The association of attitudes towards transsexualism/transgenderism with political affiliation (conservatism/liberalism) indicates that it is difficult, if not impossible, to discuss the issue in a political vacuum, taking only individual and social well-being into account.

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