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Lecturer: M. A. Kirsten Middeke
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Gendered Language in the EFL classroom

Singular*They* in German Textbooks and the Berlin Curriculum

Delaja Harder
Ramlersstraße 1
13355 Berlin
delaja.harder@fu-berlin.de
Matrikelnummer: 4405355

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1 Introduction

Speech acts are acts of projection: the speaker projects his inner universe via a common language (with its nuance of grammar, vocabulary and accent) or via a particular choice of language where choices exist ... The speaker implicitly invites others to share his projection of the world (Mesthrie 2010: 71)

What Mesthrie states here is essentially that humans communicate their “inner universe” – thus, their thoughts, emotions, needs, wishes, motivations, attitudes, etc. – through language, in order to create what Keysar and Horton call “Common Ground” (Keysar & Horton 1998; Assimakopoulos 2008; Clark et al. 1983). An important aspect in this process of communication that Mesthrie sets a focus upon is that in language there is always an indefinite number of ways to express the complexities of one's inner universe; there are linguistic choices. How exactly someone expresses their inner self to the world changes and influences how this person is perceived and understood by other people and what they in turn think and feel. Thus, choice of vocabulary, grammar and ways to express oneself matter. Thoughts influence words and vice versa, words and thoughts influence actions, and finally the outcome of actions influences what somebody says and thinks about something or someone. That is to say, we should use words consciously and thoughtfully because they represent our emotions, inner motivations, point of view, and political standing, and if we do choose them consciously we have the power to change circumstances as to our interests and wishes.

Spolsky (2010: 4) defines language management as “the application of power coming from authority” and continues saying that from a liberal point of view “people should be allowed free choice of language” (ibid.). However, in order to be able to choose and to be free in that choice all citizens need to be provided “with linguistic access to civic life [and] their freedom to choose also which language best represents their social, cultural, and religious identity” (ibid.). That is where Educational Linguistics comes into play. Educational linguistics is interested in how, by whom and for what reasons language is used in educational settings, in language classes but also in other subjects. The aim is to create an awareness for the power of language, show students their choices, enable them to use language consciously for different purposes and to decode the language around them. There are different registers that need to be used appropriately, and there is a subtext and an undertone underneath each utterance or written statement, commercial, and newspaper article. Language is used purposefully and students should be enabled to identify and critically reflect upon those purposes, and consequently express themselves in a conscious and informed manner. School should teach critical thinking,

rather than keep the pupils naïve and vulnerable to manipulation. It is the responsibility of language teachers as well as other teachers to raise awareness, and use language appropriately. After all, the teacher is “a model of the target language her/himself” (Sunderland 1992: 82).

In order for pupils to be able to use language consciously they have to learn about the different choices they have and about the power of rhetoric. Pupils should be made aware during the course of their years at school how through language all sorts of discrimination can be and is transported and reproduced, consciously and subconsciously. Utterances can not only be racist, sexist or fascist by their content but also by their structure. In this work, I will focus on the aspect of sexism in language, and for the meantime ignore the many other forms of discrimination present in everyday communication. Gender¹ in language has long been an issue discussed by many scholars, feminist and anti-feminist (Bodine 1975: 131). Still existing gender inequalities manifest in language in diverse ways:

Linguistic sexism at code level has been identified in the pronoun system ('generic' he, him, his, himself); 'generic' man; masculine and feminine 'equivalents', which through 'semantic derogation' (Schulz, 1975) are not so now, the feminine being often less prestigious and/or having sexual connotations (e.g. master/mistress, manager/manageress); under-lexicalization (*husband-swapping party); over-lexicalization (e.g. the number of verbs used disparagingly for women talking and of nouns referring to sexually active women), and 'male firstness' ... Discussions of change focus on, inter alia, the use of s/he, 'singular they' (which is not new), Ms, -person words, and alternative, more familiar 'neutral' forms: e.g. flight attendant (Sunderland 1992: 81-2)

As one result of the ongoing process of striving for equal rights for members of each gender, it has become common to use singular *they/them/their* instead of the generic *he/him/his*, in the English speaking world. Instead of saying: “One of the students forgot his book”, it is common to say: “One of the students forgot their book”. One of many examples where singular *they/them/their* is used, is the following slide, that can be found on an American website, offering advice for building businesses and the profession way to approach customers:

1 In this work I use “gender” to mean culturally assigned and influenced characteristics of each sex; I refer to “sex” as the biological sex of a person.

1. Thank the customer for their purchase and congratulate them.

- Personally thank each customer for visiting your business and congratulate them on receiving a great deal.
- Let them know your expectations. You want to impress them and see them again.
- A primary reason a customer turns into a repeat customer is if they are treated like a star.
- Although, these customers paid a discount, it is MORE important than ever to go above and beyond for them and verbally let them know you are thankful for their business.
- Gratitude and a hand shake from a manager *can go a very long way*.
- Ask to see the customer again soon.
- Smile more often.
- Ensure your employees know the importance of treating your new customers with kindness and respect.



<http://image.slidesharecdn.com/dailydealbuilder-training-win-win-win-140221160814-phpapp01-140221205530-phpapp01/95/daily-deal-builder-ecommerce-software-trainingwinwinwin-15-638.jpg?cb=1393016632>

In this paper, I will discuss this phenomenon further, before I deal with the question whether singular *they* should be taught and used resolutely in the EFL classroom. Further, I will take a close look into English textbooks that are used at schools in Berlin and into the official curriculum introduced by the senate administration in 2006/2007 and see whether it reveals information about the actual use and teaching of singular *they* in the EFL classroom. Has the phenomenon found its way into the curriculum and into German textbooks for English as a foreign language?

2 Gender Bias Through Use of Pronouns

Whereas earlier gender and language research was more about describing linguistic differences between the language use of men and women, more recent research in that field is concerned with the fact that language can be sexist, for example by “presenting things from a male perspective” (Mesthrie 2010: 72). Mesthrie claims that language “not only reflects existing

inequalities, but also helps to sustain and reproduce them unless challenged” (ibid. 73). We can find relations between the specific use of language of a person and their behaviour or even the behaviour of others. Speakers don't use language randomly; there are underlying rules and structures following strict and measurable patterns for each speaker variety, which is what Labov found to be structures heterogeneity (Labov 1982). He found that there is something like a systematic variation of language use according to the different social settings and speech communities people move in. Mesthrie (2010: 72) comments this phenomenon as follows: “The individual ... creates for himself patterns of linguistic behaviour so as to resemble those of the group or groups which he wishes to be identified [with] at different times”². If a person who is well respected in their group uses a new item of language, it is likely that the ones wanting to be identified with that group will follow.

In the introduction, I cited Mesthrie (2010: 71) who talks of speech acts as acts of projection of our inner universe. Of course, in conversation there usually is an addressee a speech act is directed to or rather an interlocutor who will respond in a certain way to an utterance (Keysar & Horton 1998: 191). Mesthrie (2010: 71) concludes that the “feedback he receives from those with whom he talks may reinforce his perceptions, or may cause him to modify his projections, both in their form and content. To the extent that his speech forms reinforce, his behaviour in that context may become more regular”. Thus, if speakers constantly use *he* to refer to doctors, lawyers, pilots and other professions that historically and stereotypically are assigned to men it reinforces or perception of these jobs should be carried out mainly by men rather than women. The opposite counts for using *she* to refer to waitresses, nurses, babysitters and other jobs for historical reasons associated with women. However, if speakers used *they/them/their* in those instances where the sex of somebody is unknown or irrelevant, these prejudgements might diminish in the long run.

Sunderland (1992: 81) remarks that what Pennycook (1989: 610) calls *gendered division* operates on more than just the level of language. Therefore, she observes “three areas in which gender manifests itself in the EFL classroom” (Sunderland 1992: 81). Those are the language used in class, the partly stereotypical representation of both sexes in EFL material (such as text books), and processes such as the way the teacher talks to pupils according to their sex and assumes different learning styles and strategies. For matters of space, I will restrict myself to only one of these aspects: The English language, not in teacher talk, but only in EFL material. I will focus on the aspect singular *they* in textbooks and the curriculum. Of course, It takes more

² Mesthrie (2010) constantly uses “he” when he refers to “the speaker”, which is a brilliant example for the use of generic *he* and in this context seems questionable.

than just replacing generic *he* and *she* by *they* to eradicate gender stereotypes. However, the hope in suggesting this step is that if we do not reproduce stereotypes such as who works in which career through our language, then children would be more likely to choose a job according to their interests and talents rather than to what the language produced by society tells them is appropriate for them. That could lead to an increase of the number of woman working in high positions, as well as the emotional well being of men wanting to work in jobs that for a long time were seen as unmanly.

2.1 Generic “He”; Generic “She”

As “English lacks a sex-indefinite pronoun for third person singular” (Mackay 1980: 352), a person's gender is always explicit through the pronouns *he*, *she*, and their derivatives. There are no personal pronouns that can be used to refer to someone without identifying whether that person is male or female.

Gender tends to be seen as unimportant in English, and as 'natural', i.e. corresponding to sex. Yet the traditional, prescriptive 'rule' of using *he*, *him*, etc., after sex-indefinite pronouns and to refer to a person of unknown sex illustrates that it can also be grammatical. That this may be changing is relevant to both learners and teachers of English. (Sunderland 1992: 81)

In this quote Sunderland explains what is meant by the term “generic *he*”, namely the use of masculine pronouns referring to a person of unknown sex, as in: “You should see *a* doctor. *He* can tell you what you have”. Generic *she* would be the use of the pronoun *she* or its inflected or derivative forms to refer to generic antecedents – representatives of something or someone of whom the sex is unknown or irrelevant – that are regarded as stereotypically feminine. Generic *he* and *she* still appear in written and spoken language, however, as Sunderland already noted fourteen years ago “it is no longer acceptable to many speakers in many contexts” (ibid. 83). Nevertheless, the alternatives, which are for example *his* or *her* and *s/he* “are often deemed stylistically inferior, described variously as 'pedantic', 'unwieldly', 'cumbersome', 'heavy', and 'awkward’” (ibid.). The use of singular *they* after an indefinite pronoun, on the other hand, “may be approved as an informal alternative in speaking, but students may be discouraged from using it in writing” (ibid.). These quotes reflect what Sunderland (1992) found observing American Teacher Talk as well as American school material. I would like to find out whether this attitude is still present today and in German course books. First, I will introduce alternatives to the use of generic *he* and *she* though.

2.2 Singular *They/Them/Their*

As the use of generic *he* is nowadays seen in some contexts as sexist and “out of date” (Sunderland 1992: 85), it is often replaced by either *he or she* or by the plural pronoun *they*. By singular *they* I mean the use of the pronoun *they* or its inflected forms as a gender-neutral pronoun to refer to a singular antecedent. Sentences where it is often used are those with antecedents of indeterminate gender, such as in example 1. Other example would be sentences with generic antecedents, that is to say, antecedents of unknown sex that stand as representatives for a group, such as in examples 2 and 3.

1. *Somebody* left *their* keys in the office.
2. *The patient* should be told what *they* have to do to get better.
3. *A doctor* should not talk about private details of *their* patients.

Although some people still argue that the use of singular *they/them* is grammatically speaking incorrect, as antecedents seek gender- and number-matched pronouns, reading-time experiments showed that “singular *they* is a cognitively efficient substitute for generic *he* or *she*, particularly when the antecedent is nonreferential” (Foertsch and Gernsbacher 1997: 106). That is to say, singular *they* is not more difficult to process at least in written language than generic *he* or *she*. Nevertheless, singular *they* still finds its antagonists. Okrent (2015) questions this antagonism, arguing the following:

Proponents of singular *they* have long argued that the prohibition makes no sense. Not only is it natural, it has been used in English for centuries. It's in the King James Bible. Authors like Chaucer, Shakespeare, Swift, Austen, Thackeray, and Shaw used it. Before the production of school textbooks for grammar in the 19th century, no one complained about it or even noticed it. Avoiding it is awkward or necessitates sexist language. Now, in the most recent update to *The Washington Post* style guide, singular *they* has been given official approval ... [Post copy editor Bill Walsh] finally decided to endorse it in house style after coming to the conclusion that it is 'the only sensible solution to English's lack of a gender-neutral third-person singular personal pronoun.'" (Okrent 2015)

In Austen's “Northanger Abbey”, Mrs. Allen states: “if we knew anybody we would join them directly. The Skinners were here last year -- I wish they were here now”, and John Thorpe claims: “I am sure of this -- that if every body was to drink their bottle a day, there would...”, to give only two of the many examples of Austen's use of the phenomenon. “And whoso fyndeth hym out of swich blame ... They wol come up...” is a quote that can be found in Chaucer's “The Pardoner’s Prologue”, and “every fool can do as they’re bid” wrote Jonathan Swift in “Polite Conversation”. Many other examples of the use of singular *they/them/their* by famous writers

can be found on a presentation published by the University of Edinburgh on http://www.lel.ed.ac.uk/~gpullum/grammar/sing_they_sli.pdf.

Ann Bodine (1975: 129) writes about the generic *he* phenomenon as a manifestation of “androcentrism in prescriptive grammar”. In her essay, she shows that singular *they* is by no means a new invention but rather a form that has been around and used throughout many centuries. The feminist movement against generic *he* and in favour of using singular *they* to refer to a person whose sex is irrelevant or unknown is one that started in the 1970s. However, this movement has to be seen as a *counter*-movement to the anti-feminist movement of grammarians attempting to alter the language according to their androcentric world-view, trying to eradicate the use of *they* as a singular pronoun, which had been widely used for a long time (ibid. 131). Further, Bodine (1975: 133) demonstrates the contradictions in the argumentation of the opponents of singular *they*:

If the definition of 'they' as exclusively plural is accepted, then 'they' fails to agree with a singular, sex-indefinite antecedent by one feature – that of number. Similarly, 'he' fails to agree with a singular, sex-indefinite antecedent by one feature – that of gender. A non-sexist 'correction' would have been to advocate 'he or she', but rather than encourage this usage the grammarians actually tried to eradicate it also, claiming 'he or she' is 'clumsy', 'pedantic', or 'unnecessary' (Bodine 1975: 133).

Thus, although grammarians maintained that they were arguing logically on the level of accuracy and elegance, their argumentation can easily be questioned: It is by no means more accurate to refer to a female person by “he” than to refer to one person by “they”. Bodine argues that the reverse is the case as “number lacks social significance” (ibid.), whereas “personal reference, including personal pronouns, is one of the most socially significant aspects of language” (ibid. 144).

While Bodine in 1975 (144) foretells a language change in the pronoun system that goes as far as to implement singular *they* as the common way to express third person singular pronouns relating to sex-indefinite antecedents, Mackey (1980: 364) disagrees fifteen years later, emphasizing the difficulties a stringent prescription of singular *they* would entail. However, he does admit that in terms of naturalness as well as neutrality singular *they* is clearly a successful solution to the problem. As negative implementations he describes the “covert ambiguity” (ibid. 355) in sentences like “If a [teacher] has no faith in their [students], how can they succeed?” (ibid.), a loss of personal involvement, problems in the processing of plural *they*, vagueness, and other side effects.

Regardless of the possible difficulties described by Mackey (1980), an American study from the late 1990s shows that the use of singular *they* has been widely accepted, at least among English native speaking American students (Foertsch & Gernsbacher 1997). The study measured the time participants needed for reading sentences where the pronouns singular *they* and generic *he* or *she* were used referring to antecedents that were either “stereotypically masculine (e.g., *truck driver*), stereotypically feminine (e.g., *nurse*) gender neutral (e.g., *runner*), or indefinite pronouns (e.g., *anybody*)” (Foertsch & Gernsbacher 1997: 106). Two experiments were carried out, the first of which used non-referential antecedents (e.g., “A sailor who...”), whereas the second one tested the reading time of the pronouns referring to referential antecedents (e.g., “My nurse...”, “That truck driver”, or “A runner I knew...”). The results showed that for the majority of readers the use of singular *they* is not problematic or even favourable, as long as the antecedent is non-referential. Using a non-specific *they* rather than the sex indicating pronouns *he* or *she* does only seem strange when the sender indicates through the use of a referential antecedent that they already know the specific person and thus presumably also know their sex (ibid. 108-110).

While this does not indicate that the use of singular *they* would seem natural for students who learn English as a second or foreign language, it does suggest that it should become natural for them too in the course of their education, as the goal of EFL classes should be for students to acquire a knowledge of the language as close to the native use as possible. Sunderland (1992: 85) states that “students need to recognize both *Ms* as a legitimate honorific, the denotative equivalent of *Mr*, and 'singular *they*' as an alternative to *he* and *she* – because they are likely to encounter them”. Of course, teachers do not want pupils travelling English-speaking countries speaking in a “markedly old-fashioned way: 'generic' *he* can easily sound out of date” (ibid.).

A later study (Sanford and Filik 2007), using a method that allows for more precise observation of reaction/processing times – eye-tracking – showed that the mental processing of singular *they* used referring to singular antecedents does, in fact, need more time than when it is used for plural antecedents; there is a so called “number-mismatch effect” (ibid. 177). However, this mismatch does also occur when singular pronouns are used for plural antecedents. The authors do not conclude from their results that the use of *they* as a genderless singular referential pronoun is unnatural. On the contrary, they do admit that it does occur in certain contexts when it seems natural (ibid. 176). They merely describe that they found some processing difficulties. Nevertheless, it is in no way suggested that singular *they* should be used less.

There seems to be no crucial reason for students not to learn about the use of *they* and its derivative forms as gender neutral singular pronouns. Even if the processing cost might be higher than when those pronouns are used as plural pronouns, it is a fact that they are and have been used for a long time to refer to singular pronouns, especially to indefinite pronouns. Furthermore, the authors of the articles cited above do claim that the use of generic *he* to refer to indefinite pronouns, but also to generic antecedents does in many context seem outdated and is connected to sexist register. Here, the use of singular *they* would be the more common and natural choice. Assuming that to be the case, the possible use of singular *they* should be taught in English foreign/second language classrooms. In this context it would also be worth thinking about initiating a general discussion about political correctness in the English language, and the consequences of unconscious and potentially discriminatory use of it in the EFL classroom.

3 Singular *They/Them/Their* in Berlin Schools

Bodine surveyed 33 school grammars that were used in and around 1975 in American junior and senior high schools, and found that only three of them gave an adequate explanation of the use of *they*, although even those were still condemning its use as a singular pronoun (Bodine 1975: 139). In the following, I would like to offer insight into contemporary German course books for English language teaching, and closely observe their treatment of *they*. For that matter, I have chosen English textbooks published by the three biggest educational publishers in Germany: Cornelsen, Klett and Diesterweg, the last of which specialises on languages only.

3.1 A Close Look into the English Textbook

As pronouns are a fundamental issue already in the first steps of language learning, I start by portraying the content of primary school textbooks. The following list provides an overview of the primary school English textbooks I have observed, sorted by editor:

Klett:

- *Green Line 1* (for Gymnasium, grade five)
- *Green Line 2* (for Gymnasium, grade six)
- *Orange Line 1* (for differentiating forms of schools, grade five)
- *Orange Line 2* (for differentiating forms of schools, grade six)

Cornelsen:

- *G 21, D1* (for grade five)
- *G 21, D2* (for grade six)

Diesterweg:

- *Camden Market 1* (for grade five)
- *Camden Market 2* (for grade six)

Of these eight textbooks, all the ones for the fifth grade cover the topic of pronouns in their separated grammar section. However, none of them addresses the issue of the possible use of *they* as a singular pronoun. *Green Line 1* shows the most complex treatment of the topic, also dealing with the object case of personal pronouns (ibid. 2010: 153) whereas the others leave out that particular aspect. Nevertheless, there is no mention of singular *they*.

Of course, in the first year of English the issue of gender bias and discrimination in language does not play a big role, considering that the primary interest here is to teach and learn the most basic rules of the foreign language. A discussion about gender and discrimination would not be appropriate, neither for the age group nor for their level of English knowledge. Such a discussion is better situated on a level where the exact oral as well as written expression matters for the evaluation of the pupil's language knowledge. That is especially the case in three years leading up to the German Abitur, qualifying pupils to enter university. Here, the awareness about political correctness in language should long have taken place in German and should enter their use of English as well. Therefore, I examined the following textbooks for the upper grades:

Klett:

- *Skyline, Advanced Level, Ausgabe A*
- *Skyline, Advanced Level, Ausgabe C*
- *Straight on, Englisch Klasse 11*
- *Straight on, Englisch Klasse 12/13*

Cornelsen:

- *Context 21*

All of these five textbooks work as preparatory material for the Abitur, covering the topics suggested by the official curriculum, and preparing pupils in all the main competences requested in the Abitur exams: writing, speaking, listening, reading and mediation. There are sections dealing with practical questions like how to structure information in a mind map efficiently, reading and writing strategies, debating skills, etc. Furthermore, there is a section on English grammar, as well as a style- or register-guide in these textbooks. Nonetheless, the aspect of singular *they* has not found its way into these guides on how to use the English language appropriately. These results do not give answers about whether or not the issue is discussed and made explicit by the teachers in these grades, but at least there is no sign of it in

the textbooks that prepare pupils to go to university, to travel or to work in English speaking contexts.

Finally, I will describe the findings of the examination of the following textbooks, used in German secondary schools, grades seven to ten:

Klett:

- *Green Line 3** (for Gymnasium, grade seven)
- *Green Line 4** (for Gymnasium, grade nine)
- *Green Line 5** (for Gymnasium, grade nine)
- *Green Line 6* (for Gymnasium, grade ten)
- *Orange Line 1* (for differentiating forms of schools, Grundkurs)
- *Orange Line 2** (for differentiating forms of schools, Erweiterungskurs)

Cornelsen:

- *G 21, A3** (for Gymnasium, grade seven)
- *G 21, A4* (for Gymnasium, grade eight)
- *G 21, D3* (for differentiating forms of schools grade seven)
- *G 21, D4* (for differentiating forms of schools grade eight)
- *G 21, D5* (for differentiating forms of schools grade nine)
- *G 21, D6* (for differentiating forms of schools grade ten)

Diesterweg:

- *Camden Town 3** (for Gymnasium grade seven)
- *Camden Town 4* (for Gymnasium grade eight)
- *Camden Town 5* (for Gymnasium grade nine)
- *Camden Town 6* (for Gymnasium grade ten)

The six books marked with an asterisk cover aspects of the topic of pronouns in their grammar sections in the back. All of them deal with reflexive pronouns and the change of spelling in the plural forms (-selves). *Orange Line 3* (2011: 135) is the only one that has a section on compounds of *some* and *any*, like *some-* or *anybody*. In neither of those contexts the topic of singular *they* is to be found.

Camden Town 3 is the only one of these books where the form *himself/herself* is used in this context in the sentences: “It means the person doing an action is also the person who has the action done to himself/herself” (Camden Town 3 2009: 154) and “You already know about reflexive pronouns (for example himself, themselves, ourselves) to talk about situations when the person doing an action is the same person who has the action done to himself/herself” (ibid. 2009: 155). Still, there is no mention of singular *they* in neither of those 16 textbooks used in German secondary schools. Furthermore, I did not find evidence for gendered language – apart from singular *they* – being addressed in English language classes in Germany, in any of the

textbooks listed above for the different grades. Hence, a mention of this topic in the curriculum would be surprising. Nevertheless, I will share an insight into the matter in the section below.

3.2 A Close Look into the *Rahmenlehrplan*

In the Berlin curriculum for the secondary school I (grades seven to ten), as well as in the curriculum for the secondary school II (classes eleven to thirteen) the following passage is found on page 5:

Die Lernenden übernehmen Verantwortung für sich und ihre Mitmenschen, für die Gleichberechtigung der Menschen ungeachtet des Geschlechts, der Abstammung, der Sprache, der Herkunft, einer Behinderung, der religiösen oder politischen Anschauungen, der sexuellen Identität und der wirtschaftlichen oder gesellschaftlichen Stellung. (Rahmenlehrplan³ Sek I & II 2006: 5)

This passage appears as one of the general principles of the education in primary and secondary schools. That is to say, according to this passage it is one of the general goals of teaching, not only for English as a school subject, to enhance democratic action. Here, the topic of equal rights in relation to gender and sexual identity is mentioned. Further, it says in the curriculum for the secondary school I:

Besondere Aufmerksamkeit gilt der Wahrnehmung und Stärkung von Mädchen und Jungen in ihrer geschlechtsspezifischen Unterschiedlichkeit und Individualität. Sie werden darin unterstützt, sich bei aller Verschiedenheit als gleichberechtigt wahrzunehmen und in kooperativem Umgang miteinander und voneinander zu lernen. Dazu trägt auch eine Sexualerziehung bei, die relevante Fragestellungen fachübergreifend berücksichtigt (RLP Sek I 2006: 7).

In the same section of the curriculum for secondary school II it says:

Die Integration geschlechtsspezifischer Perspektiven in den Unterricht fördert die Wahrnehmung und Stärkung der Lernenden mit ihrer Unterschiedlichkeit und Individualität. Sie unterstützt die Verwirklichung von gleichberechtigten Lebensperspektiven. Die Schülerinnen und Schüler werden bestärkt, unabhängig von tradierten Rollenfestlegungen Entscheidungen über ihre berufliche und persönliche Lebensplanung zu treffen (RLP Sek II 2006: 7)

Thus, there is a general interest to break with stereotypical gender roles and to defend equal rights to people of each gender. Gender roles should be overcome in order for the pupils to be able to take decisions for their future regardless of their own sex. The curriculum for the secondary school I proposes to treat gender roles and sexual orientation in topic field B “Der unmittelbare Erfahrungsbereich Jugendlicher Erwachsenwerden” (RLP Sek I 2006: 48), however, that is only an optional recommendation not a required topic. The pronouns find

3 In the following, I will use the abbreviation RLP when I refer to the *Rahmenlehrplan*, which I translate by “curriculum”. I will refer to the RLP for the secondary school I by RLP Sek I, and for the one for the secondary school II by RLP Sek II.

mentioning on pages 18, 24, 32, 43 of the curriculum for secondary school I; they are linguistic tools pupils have to learn.

In secondary school II, the topic “Changing roles of men and women ” (19; 23) is one part of the first term preparing for the Abitur. The overall topic for this first term is “the individual and the society”. The description of what the students are supposed to learn during the first term is the following:

[SuS] analysieren und problematisieren Persönlichkeitsentwürfe in literarischen und anderen Texten sowie in den Medien und untersuchen dabei individuelle Grenzerfahrungen, ethische Herausforderungen, aber auch den Einfluss der Beziehungen zwischen den Geschlechtern, zwischen den Generationen, zwischen der Gesellschaft und dem Einzelnen, zwischen beruflichen Anforderungen und individuellen Träumen oder zwischen Wirklichkeit und Phantasie ... finden gemeinsam Lösungsansätze für Rollenkonflikte und formulieren dabei Alternativen (RLP Sek II 2006: 9).

Although it seems to be one of the explicit goals of the senate administration to generate an awareness about gender roles created by society in the pupils, to enable them to analyse and criticise these, I found no evidence for this in the textbooks. Furthermore, neither the curricula nor the textbooks suggest to deal with the issue of discrimination reproduced in language.

4 Discussion

As the topic of singular *they* is a fairly specific matter and makes up only a small fragment of the ongoing discourses on gender roles and political correctness in language, it is not surprising that this particular matter is not treated explicitly in English language textbooks. To find a recommendation on dealing with this issue in the curriculum would have been even more surprising. However, I would have expected to find an entry on political correctness in language in relation to topics such as gender roles, discrimination or stereotypes in the curriculum and maybe even in the textbooks. After all, gender roles, discrimination and stereotypes *are* topics in the curriculum and in the textbooks. How can it be, that these issues are discussed without addressing the way and the language they are discussed in? Can EFL material dealing with gender roles, discrimination and/or stereotypes be authentic if the language the author uses is inappropriate or unconsciously chosen?

As a matter of fact, *people use language* when ever they communicate about discrimination or about stereotypical gender roles. One would assume that by entering such a discourse, especially in a language classroom, the interest in the conscious choice of a particular register rises. I argue that, using language to talk about any form of discrimination and to communicate

their standing, people become more aware of their choice of words and (want to) use them accordingly. That is to say, dealing with gender roles in school requires the teacher as well as the students to reflect upon their language use.

Although these assumptions seem logical to me, I have no proof of them being correct. To find out whether there is a relation between dealing with socio-political topics and the awareness of one's language use, I would have to collect data and carry out a study answering that question. As for now, I can just assume that Clark et al. (1983: 246) are correct when they say that “the speaker designs his utterance in such a way that he has good reason to believe that the addressee can readily and uniquely compute what he meant on the basis of the utterance along with the rest of their common ground”. If I assume that to be correct, then it becomes important to give students the ability to design their messages in such a particular way, and based on profound knowledge and sufficient information that they can create their own identities and communicate themselves to the world according to their inner convictions. That is why I suggest to integrate the comparably little but very present issue of singular *they* in the textbooks, and the more general topic discrimination versus political correctness in language use in the curricula.

One proposition could be to insert a side note on the use of singular *they* already in the textbooks for the first year of English. A possible phrasing could be: “Although *they* is a plural pronoun, it is also used sometimes to refer to one single person, when the person is unknown. See examples 1) *Somebody* left *their* keys in the office, and 2) *A doctor* should not talk about private details of *their* patients”. The advantage of teaching the use of singular *they* at such an early stage is that it would become normal for them to use it. The question is whether at this early stage of English learning, the extra information would confuse the learners, or whether it would help to make their English use and learning process more natural.

In fifth grade, pupils are around eleven years old and capable of understanding the gender problem in German. One could apply ideas from the multilingualist classroom approach⁴ for that matter and translate the sentences into German: 1) Jemand hat seinen/ihren/die Schlüssel im Büro vergessen, 2) Ein Arzt/eine Ärztin/Ärzte sollte/n nicht über private Details seiner/ihrer Patient*innen reden. Here, the problem would become obvious, and the issue would be clear, right from the beginning. However, it might also be too early in time and too confusing for English learning beginners.

⁴ Consult Jackisch, J. (2014); Schmidt, C. (2010); Müller-Hartmann, or A., M. Schocker-v. Dittfurth (2006) for more information and a deeper insight into the ideas of this approach.

Where I would suggest conscious and precise language use to play a bigger role is in the upper grades ten to thirteen. In these years, topics such as living together in a multicultural society, globalisation, immigration, gender roles, racism and miscommunication are discussed in the English language classroom. Not only in the context of gender debates, but also in the context of discrimination based on different cultural backgrounds, the use of pejorative words has long been an issue. Talking about words that were used and words that are still used to talk in a derogatory way about somebody or a group of people, one could also deal with gender neutral language that is widely used in order to talk in a non-discriminatory way about members of the different sexes. If it is a goal, as it is stated in the curriculum, to enable students to form their own identities and make job choices regardless of their sex, then stereotypical gender allocations should disappear from language. One could start by not talking only of male doctors, lawyers and professors by assigning male pronouns to them even when their sex is unknown or irrelevant. In these cases, one could use singular *they* instead. Besides, singular *they* is widely used in the English speaking world, as a matter of fact. Thus, people learning the English language should learn about it, if only to have the choice to decide whether or not they want to use it to express themselves.

Mesthrie (2010: 78) writes about the different socio-cultural status of dialects and states that “[u]ltimately, this depends on power relations within societies, habits of history, and degrees and kinds of literacies that operate within communities”. That is to say, how a dialect, or a linguistic feature for that matter, is perceived, whether it is appreciated and by whom depends on power relations within societies. However, we should not forget, that after all, a linguistic item is not only a linguistic item, but it stands for something or someone that it linguistically represents. Of course, powerful people can argue that the use of *they* as a singular pronoun is grammatically incorrect, yet, it represents a step into the direction towards equal rights for a group of people that has been discriminated for a long time and that makes up half of the population of the planet. Lets hope that Zuber (1993: 526) is wrong in claiming that the proscription of singular *they* is “based on an appeal to an authority constructed to maintain gender and class inequities”, and that the authorities are also interested in securing equal rights for everybody. As long as singular *they* is successfully used, and as long as there is no more satisfactory solution to the problem that English lacks a sex-indefinite pronoun for third person singular, I suggest the teaching of singular *they* in the English language classroom.

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