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# Gender constructions in Austrian RE textbooks – a comparative linguistic textbook analysis

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## ABSTRACT

The contribution gives insights into a comparative linguistic textbook analysis of two Austrian Catholic Religious Education (RE) textbooks for colleges for higher vocational schools ('BHS') and vocational schools for apprentices ('VocEd'). Gender constructions are still a desideratum in RE textbook research in Austria. Previous gender-oriented analyses mostly used qualitative content analysis or mainly questionnaires. This paper followed the approach of linguistic textbook analysis addressing gender constructions on a linguistic level by comparing both textbooks, asking which and how two selected chapters of Austrian RE textbooks in use construct gender on a linguistic level. A discussion of the main results, considering previous gender sensitive RE research, aimed to develop criteria for prospects of action with teaching materials in the current context of plurality of genders and sexualities in a democratic society.

## KEYWORDS

Textbook analysis; gender; religious education; vocational school

## Introduction

Schools are a mirror of societal realities and places of socialisation (Bräu and Schlickum 2015; Faulstich-Wieland 2002). It is assumed that textbooks leave an impression and play a role in socialisation. Behnke states, that 'the effects of gender representations in textbooks are influenced, inter alia, by students' cultural and social context' (2018, 384). Nevertheless, 'language in textbooks may affect students' knowledge construction' (Behnke 2018, 391) by the inherent 'hidden curriculum' (Jackson 1968), as shown by Bodo Von Borries (2010).

In terms of the goal of gender equality and the commitment to gender mainstreaming, the European Union and the Austrian federal government have laid a foundation on a legislative level (BMUKK 1995). Schools must therefore be a space where equal treatment and gender equality are consciously practiced. Special attention was also given to the design of teaching materials (BMUKK 2012). If RE is to remain relevant in public discourse (Lehner-Hartmann 2020), RE must engage in this discussion (Krainz 2014, 66–69).

Research on gender constructions in RE textbooks is needed, as there is a lack of research findings in the Austrian religious textbook field (for more see literature review below). Although this work only provides a highly focused analysis, it aims to stimulate further investigations.<sup>1</sup> A central concern of Religious Education (RE), according to the discourse of German-speaking religious pedagogy, is to support the exposure and deconstruction of mechanisms of oppression (Grümme 2009; Herbst 2022; Könemann 2016). Additionally, the analysis aligns with

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transformative (religious) 'Bildung' (Koller 2017; Lehner-Hartmann 2017). A textbook analysis, promoting gender-sensitive approaches in RE, can facilitate transformative engagement with gender, without imposing or perpetuating hierarchies (Hartmann 2015, 42f).

## RE Textbook analysis – literature review and desiderata

### *Gender and RE textbook research*

Though not prominent, the issue of gender in RE textbooks is not fundamentally new in research in German-speaking countries. Since the late 1960s, but especially from the 1970s and more intensively from the 1980s, there have been textbook analyses from (then) feminist perspectives (Florian 1985; Rampillon 1986).

In the field of RE textbook research, Andres' (1988) study on sexist influences in three secondary level 1 textbooks was particularly significant, as it provided a clear – yet extensive – questionnaire that was subsequently used in further analyses.<sup>2</sup> Annabelle Pithan differentiated this approach over the years (Pithan 1993a, 1993b, esp. 427–432, Pithan 1994, 1995a, 1995b). However, she also points out the need for further methodological discussions (Pithan 1993a, 427, footnote 15), particularly regarding the approach to 'difference' taken by Ulrike Fichera (1990, 1996), or the categories of spatial, frequency, and value analysis used by Veit-Jakobus Dieterich (1992).

Although notable studies were made (Grill 1990; Lindner and Lukesch 1994; Meyer, Reents, and Ulrich 1990), Manfred Kwiran (1995) criticised that the feminist developments had not yet reached RE textbooks. Renate Hofmann (1999) found a decrease in common stereotypes about girls and women in Protestant RE books for secondary level 1 in grammar schools and criticised the selective reduction of the few biblical female figures presented in the books. At the beginning millennium, Angela Volkmann (2003, 2004) stated that the analysed textbook had no awareness of gender-sensitivity. The last analyses were contributed by Franziska Stegili (2009) and Christiane Rösener (2010), both referring to criteria elaborated in other textbook analyses (Hahn 2007; Volkmann 2004), stating some progress concerning gender in RE textbooks.

### *Gender and RE textbook research in Austria*

In Austria, the examination of textbooks from feminist perspectives began in the mid-1970s (Kissling 1989, esp. 147–192). In recent years, textbook analyses on the topic of gender have been published in Austria as part of qualification or diploma theses for several subjects. However, there are hardly any gender-oriented studies of RE textbooks, specifically in the Catholic domain.

Anita Lang (1986), who examined the image of women and girls in Austrian RE textbooks for grades 5 to 9, was one of the first and criticised the lack of female figures in textbooks (Walch-Lang 1991). Heike Bauer's (1996) examination of role clichés in textbooks for grade 5 and Monika Liedler's (1998) (unfortunately very unsystematic) analysis from a feminist Bible study perspective of two textbooks for grade 6 and 9, followed the questionnaires of Pithan (1994, 1995a, 1995b) and Andres (1988). Elisabeth Duschet (2004, 2005) examined a primary school textbook and its four teacher's manuals. The analysis used both quantitative and qualitative approaches (Duschet 2004, 45–53) and refers to Andres' (1988) questionnaire, considered as too extensive and subjective. Subsequently, Duschet developed her own research method (categorisation of individuals into stereotypical pairs; analysis of language usage based on feminist linguistics). At this point, it is questionable whether the categorisation and assignment lead to increased objectivity as she postulated. The last two textbook analyses did not appear until 2014, once again as bachelor's (Heiligenbrunner 2014) and master's thesis (Ladenhauf 2014), confirming previous findings.

An intensive and systematic examination of gender constructions in Austrian RE textbooks is a desideratum, especially concerning colleges for higher vocational education ('Berufsbildende Höhere Schule', ISCED 5; in Austria abbreviated as 'BHS') and vocational schools for apprentices

(‘Berufsschule’, ISCED 3; here abbreviated as ‘VocEd’). Annebelle Pithan’s (1993b, 433f) demands for empirical research, the development of criteria for assessing sexism and gender equity in RE textbooks, and the sensitisation of RE teachers, have therefore not lost any of their relevance.

To address this research gap, the author of this article undertook a methodologically novel approach and examined two RE textbooks (Mayrhofer 2018a, 2018b) from the previously neglected field of BHS and VocEd.

## Aims, objectives and research questions

The aim of this paper is the critical examination of concepts of genders and sexualities in selected chapters on creation-theological and anthropological topics in approved Catholic Austrian RE textbooks for BHS and VocEd. Furthermore, the paper wants to contribute to raising awareness regarding the use of teaching materials from a gender perspective. Therefore, the analysis engaged in a discussion with theological considerations (Eckholt 2017) and reflections on RE (Pithan et al. 2009; Qualbrink, Pithan, and Wischer 2011; Wieser 2015) to establish appropriate criteria for the handling of teaching materials.

The following research questions arose for the investigation:

- (1) What constructions of gender can be found in texts of RE textbooks, using creation-theological-anthropological chapters as an example?
- (2) How are these constructions established at the linguistic level?
- (3) What are appropriate criteria for the handling of teaching materials concerning ‘gender’?

## Construction of gender reality through texts

Research findings strongly indicate a correlation between grammatical gender and individuals’ conceptualisation (Braun et al. 2007; Gabriel et al. 2008; Gyax et al. 2008). Therefore, this study conducts a language-centred analysis (Ott 2013, 2014, 2015) of RE textbooks. This approach is based on the premise that gender is constructed not only socially (Bourdieu 1984; Goffman 2001; Youniss 1994), but also through linguistic communication (Flick 2019, 157). Text, understood as a ‘primary sign’ (Frank and Meidl 2008, 153), is a means of communication, opening a particular understanding of the world and environment.

Poststructuralism indicated that texts constantly involve a deferral and displacement of meaning, characterised by Derrida (1972) with the term ‘différance’. Language is not a fixed or closed system, but rather a continual process of differentiation and interrelation and not a representation of a given reality (Taylor 1988, 63–73). Consequently, language is a highly moral, normative space and framework filled with already enacted and continually recreated value systems (Taylor 1975, 182f). As a social practice, language is a shared space of experience and exploration of reality (Taylor 2016). In the poststructuralist radicalisation, language is conceived as a differential system of signs that constitutes the subject itself in its diverse enactments (Babka and Posselt 2016, 92), nevertheless opposing any determinism (Butler 2006; Taylor 2016).

Furthermore, Habermas (1984a, 1984b, 1984c) highlights the distinction between facts (what makes a statement true) and events (objects of experience), as well as objectivity (valid only in the realm of experience) and truth (located in the realm of knowledge, determined by successful argumentation). In consequence, it is important to consider how textbooks construct such truth claims.

Bußmann (2005) elaborates linguistic construction of these claims to validity, making a distinction between language *use* and language as *a linguistic system*. He states that in the latter a naive correlation between the categories of ‘sexus’ and ‘genus’ is made. From a linguistic perspective, this cannot be upheld and leads to strong essentialism. Especially in German, there is often confusion between (1) genus as a grammatical category, (2) the lexical motivated genus, (3) the referential motivated genus and (4) genus in the sense of gender as a social category.

Hence, textbooks can be seen as the product of a 'discourse' (Klerides 2010, 31), creating a specific version of reality. A linguistic textbook analysis tries to uncover these constructions (Ott 2013).

## Method

### *Methodological perspective*

The method used in this analysis aligns with the field of textbook-related linguistics (Ott 2013). Ott notes that previous content analyses have overlooked the 'linguistic aspect of reality constructions' (2013, 32). It is a qualitative approach (Pingel 2010, 67) and linked to discourse-analysis (Spitzmüller and Warnke 2011).<sup>3</sup>

The linguistic textbook analysis is a deconstructive-reconstructive procedure. It disassembles linguistic material (Babka and Posselt 2016, 33–37), analysing the linguistic system for its 'inherent instability and power saturation' (Babka and Posselt 2016, 47f). The analysis is reconstructive concerning the research object, attempting to reconstruct linguistic constructions of the category 'gender' (Bohnsack 2014a, 65). A comparative analysis is intrinsic to reconstructive procedures, here ensured through the comparison of two textbooks.

### *Data selection*

The required brevity led to a selection of types of schools and textbooks (Ritzer 2015, 108). The analysis focused on BHS and VocEd, as a majority of pupils (35.98% BHS, 29.74% VocEd) attends these school types (Statistik Austria 2023). Only approved religious textbooks were used (BMB 2017), with a focus on grade nine onwards to ensure comparability through the same age group. As BHS and VocEd have only one textbook series available ('Religion BHS' and 'Reli4ever. Religion Berufsschule'), no further selection had to be made.

The selection of thematic chapters was based on Bohnsack's (2014a, 136–145; esp. 136f) steps for text interpretation (*thematic relevance, comparability, and exceptional thematic and metaphorical density*), and are in line with the criteria of *transparency, intersubjectivity, and reliability* of qualitative research (Steinke 2019, 323–331). Therefore, all chapters in which gender is addressed, chapters that are easily comparable (based on their thematic design) and exhibit thematic and metaphorical density (related to gender) were considered thematically relevant. Due to these criteria, the following creation-theological and anthropological thematic chapters were chosen:

- (1) 'Als Mann und Frau geschaffen' [engl. Created as Man and Woman], from 'Ermutigungen Religion BHS 4' (Vitovec et al. 2006, 65–82)
- (2) 'Der Mensch geschaffen als Frau und Mann – Der Mensch geschaffen als Mann und Frau' [engl. The Human Created as Woman and Man – The Human Created as Man and Woman], from 'reli4ever (Berufsschule 4)' (Ender et al. 2008, 46–49).

### *Research design*

The intra-textual analysis was conducted on three levels:

The *lexical level* began with the smallest unit, the lexemes, considering their semantic and meaning-generating realisations (Spitzmüller and Warnke 2011, 139–145). It identified central concepts and terms ('content words') and looked at collocations (multi-word units) regarding gender, word class, word formation type, or other relevant analytical categories (proper nouns; appellative/collective nouns; continuative nouns; key words; catchwords; occasionalisms).

The *propositional level* (Spitzmüller and Warnke 2011, 145–157) focused on the examination of predication, as 'the syntactic patterning of propositions can well illustrate discourse positions of utterances' (Spitzmüller and Warnke 2011, 147). Analytical categories as speech acts, deontic

meanings as well as rhetorical tropes and figures (Gévaudan 2008), and syntactic patterns (Frank and Meidl 2008, 157–159) were considered.

The level of *text cohesion* pertains to the linguistic surface design and its semantic coherence of a text (Frank and Meidl 2008, 171–175). It examined the number and gender assignment of characters and their linguistic phenotype (Ott 2013, 33). The texts were also analysed based on their perspectives and hierarchies.

Consistent with the approach of reconstructive social research (Bohnsack 2014a), the overall presentation was compiled through comparison and contrast of the results to identify crucial patterns.

### **Limitations**

The investigation did not include an analysis of images. Analysing visual material would require a specific methodology (Bohnsack 2014a, 157–173, 2014b; Harper 2012) and must be addressed in a separate study. Moreover, as a qualitative study, the analysis does not intend to be representative; instead, it tends to elaborate linguistic structures for the selected cases.

### **Findings**

The findings are presented in six key areas that arose from the analysis in three levels outlined above.

#### ***Gender (in)equality and relationship***

The VocEd textbook primarily focuses on the topic of gender inequality using terms like ‘challenges’, ‘inequalities’, and ‘women’s question’ to emphasise the issue. Women are depicted as responsible for balancing family, career, and profession. The role of men is predominantly portrayed in the context of (negative) dominance, only briefly discussed in a few instances. The relationship between the two genders is reinforced lexically, especially in the context of marriage, sexuality, and interpersonal relationships, using terms of equality (‘equal rights’, ‘related’, or ‘communal’). The idea is reinforced through metaphorical expressions such as ‘cut from the same cloth’.

The BHS textbook notably revolves around the various forms of relationships between women and men, particularly highlighting the institution of marriage. The human being is distinguished by the relational aspect in respect to other living beings. Gender manifests itself significantly through the realm of love and relationships, ideally realised within marriage. The depiction of gender relationships in the textbook is characterised by ‘partnership’, ‘equality’, and ‘parity’. It adheres to a heteronormative concept, briefly addressing homosexuality solely on a sexual-physical level.

#### ***De-dramatisation***

While the distinctions between being male or female are emphasised in the VocEd textbook, frequent references are made to the fundamental category of ‘humanity’, where both genders intersect.

The BHS textbook highlights the aspects of personality, equality, and shared development. Although it asserts gender on the level of speech acts, mainly realised through the copula verb ‘to be’, it repeatedly questions it through corrective, explanatory, or directive speech acts. As a result, there is a continuous interplay of dramatisation and de-dramatisation of gender.

### **Binary conception of gender**

Both texts highlight the binary conception of gender as male or female, elaborating it through the paradigms of equality and difference.

In the VocEd textbook, the equality is associated with societal realisation (work, career, family). Difference is particularly relevant concerning the biological constitution of genders. Scientific evidence (morphology, hormones, psyche) is deliberately used in this context to establish objectivity.

The BHS textbook assumes an implicit morphological difference at the biological level but does not discuss it extensively. Gender difference is considered omni-relevant, and primarily explicated through the other gender.

Both textbooks occasionally show a slight inclination towards gender hierarchy or stereotypes (motifs of victim/perpetrator, violence against women, adulterer/betrayed, etc.), but challenge these instances through corrective speech acts and lexical patterns.

### **Authority of the text**

In most cases, the emitter remains unclear. In a few instances, such as in the VocEd textbook, it is implicitly (Bible) or explicitly (science) indicated. In the BHS textbook, the emitter can most likely be identified with the schoolbook authors, lending the text an authoritative character on the linguistic level. By remaining concealed, this authority is difficult to question, and (questionable) assertions are transformed into facts.

### **Speech acts**

Assertive, directive, corrective, and explicative speech acts characterise all texts:

In both textbooks, assertive speech acts are prominent, particularly when it comes to providing biological and scientific evidence for the binary nature of gender. This is supported by biblical references, presented as undeniable facts. The BHS textbook presents a new interpretation of Gen 2 (in line with feminist exegesis) as an established fact, using both assertive and corrective speech acts to convey this understanding.

Regarding directive speech acts, the VocEd textbook explicitly opposes the discrimination of women, especially in the context of divine discourse. Similarly, the BHS textbook promotes equal relationships, encouraging men to take on tasks that were traditionally associated with femininity.

The VocEd textbook employs explicative speech acts, particularly concerning the issue of gender equality, and emphasises that women can contribute their talents and skills to areas traditionally dominated by men. The BHS textbook explains gender differences with the relation to the other gender.

### **Deontic formulations**

Both textbooks use deontic formulations, indicating obligations and norms. The VocEd textbook obliges to treat gender-specific stereotypes more sensitively. Particularly in the thematic section on marriage, the deontic significance of preserving 'fidelity' is emphasised, as did the BHS textbook. It presents marriage as an ideal of love to be fulfilled. Sexuality is always considered within the context of a heteronormative marital relationship.

### **Discussion**

Several crucial points are discussed in light of (religious) educational perspective to formulate criteria for prospects of action with teaching materials.



In the analysis of content words, three central thematic approaches have been identified. The tendency to formulate hypotheses with a claimed objectivity at the highest level of truth (Habermas 1984a, 1984b, 1984c) in the *biological-naturalist approach* must be observed critically. Consequently, a binary system of gender duality is entrenched, without addressing the questionable nature of such representations (Hagemann-White 1984). The *cultural-historical approach* carries the risk of historical determinism, particularly when portraying matriarchal societies as primitive. The *theological-anthropological perspective* is linked to the interpretive tradition of creation texts (Hunze 2009; Schüngel-Straumann 2017, 142–157; Volkmann 2004, 99–106). A reference to the ambivalent impact and reception history of Gen 2 can offer a good opportunity to disrupt this (Harbecke 2011).

Of particular concern is the depiction of gender relations as complementary opposites, inherently excluding LGBTIQ\* orientations. Additionally, homosexuality is solely addressed on the level of sexual experiences, reserving the relational aspect exclusively for heterosexual relationships. The resulting issues, particularly concerning LGBTIQ\*-identifying students, are self-evident and demand special attention and sensitivity (Bahr 2020).

The numerous universalising and collective statements tend to be equated with oversimplifications, as they only provide one possible image. This can be counteracted through processes of 'Undoing Gender' (Bidwell-Steiner and Krammer 2010; Faulstich-Wieland 2015) and 'biographical learning' (Kaupp 2023; Sajak and von Eiff 2017). Therefore, there should be a deliberate emphasis on the variations within binary gender groups and a proactive prevention of one-sided collectivisations (Heek 2020; Lehner-Hartmann 2011).

Furthermore, it was observed that the books frequently utilise assertive and deontic speech acts in their statements. However, it is crucial to embed these within a network of argumentative and corrective speech acts to defuse the former and align with the criteria of objectivity and transformative 'Bildung' (Koller 2017). The principles of multiperspectivity, controversy, and critique, as formulated by the 'Schwerter Konsent' (2022) and political RE (Grümme 2009; Herbst 2022; Könemann 2016), call for a critical engagement with RE textbooks and empowering students to handle them critically – both regarding gender and various other categories (e.g. racism, antisemitism, etc.).

The books clearly exhibit a strong omnirelevance of gender. This should be contextualised with other categories of difference in concrete pedagogical practice. This way, RE could contribute to building students' 'uncertainty competence', which prevents them from seeking premature identity assurances and encourages them to remain open to new perspectives (Lehner-Hartmann 2011).

## Conclusion

Even though there have been various improvements compared to older RE textbooks, Chisholm (2018) is right in stating 'that in the vast majority, the constructions [...] remain mired in traditional and conservative positions which deny, devalue, and marginalise women'. (234) This primarily pertains to the process of approving religious textbooks in Austria. The Austrian Bishops' Conference is responsible for the content (Erzbischöfliches Amt für Schule und Bildung 2021, 20). In matters of sexual ethics, religious textbooks often exhibit pragmatism through restraint and align with traditional doctrinal statements concerning gender issues (binarity, natural law argumentation) to secure approval. Given that realistic changes at the political level are hardly foreseeable in this regard, it is the responsibility of training religious educators to equip them with the skills necessary for handling gender equality issues in religious textbooks effectively.<sup>4</sup> This necessitates sufficient knowledge concerning the latest medical-biological research on gender-related matters, current sociological research on gender roles, and substantial theological qualifications in dealing with biblical scriptures and their reception history. This requires prospective educators to reflect on and, if necessary, revise their own gender roles and take a critical stance towards textbooks, enabling them to use them purposefully in the classroom, rather than using them for their own thematic preparation. Teachers in practice can, in turn, be sensitised and further trained on the subject through suitable training events organised by the Pedagogical Universities.



## Notes

1. Currently, a master's thesis is being conducted in Vienna on gender constructions in the newly approved textbooks for secondary level 1. Similarly, at the Faculty of Protestant Theology of the University of Vienna, M. Binder is conducting a gender-oriented analysis of textbooks as part of her doctoral thesis.
2. The criteria catalogue was largely adopted from Anabelle Pithan (1993a, 1993b) and further developed by Ulrike Fischer (1993) and subsequently by Stefanie Rieger-Goertz (2003).
3. By contrast, Chisholm summarises, that 'the majority of [international] studies are quantitative'. (2018, 231).
4. See also the written parliamentary request by Matthias Strolz (2017) to the Federal Minister of Education concerning the approval of textbooks, which casts doubt on the appropriateness of the current approval procedure for school textbooks in Austria. On the one hand, there are still cases of biased representations in school textbooks, on the other hand teachers today often use materials on the Internet.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*Florian Mayrhofer* is currently working as a university assistant at the Department of Practical Theology at the University of Vienna/Austria and a PhD candidate in the field of Religious Education. His key research interests are: gender and RE; Digital Storytelling; cooperative models of RE; interreligious learning.

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