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Preschool teachers, primary school teachers, subject teachers, and professors in public discourse in Serbia

Extended summary

The identity and status of teachers can be seen reflected, among other things, in large language corpora. This identity – never neutral in its construction – can be analysed through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (Gee, 2011; Rogers, 2011). Studies of such nature have been appearing since the late 1980s, and reviews of such works at levels from kindergarten to higher education can be found in Beijaard et al. (2004), Beauchamp & Thomas (2009) and Van Lankveld et al. (2016). Yet, there have been none based on Serbian language and its related social context, so we aim to explore that topic in this article. In the domestic linguistic field, our analysis is partly in line with that presented in Milosavljević (2013), who describes the place of the word učitelj (primary school teacher) in the lexical system of the Serbian language, with reference to the dictionaries and the electronic corpus of the Serbian language of the Faculty of Natural Sciences in Belgrade.

Our research is based on the corpus Public Discourse in the Republic of Serbia, since the image of certain phenomena that is created in a particular language community can be examined through material consisting of several million language forms in a large language corpus. For the purposes of this paper, from the basic corpus of 715,405,341 tokens gathered by crawling the .rs domain in September and October 2022 (Wasserscheidt 2023), subcorpora related to teachers at different levels in the education system were created. Concordances for 10 lemmas – both neutral/masculine and feminine, as well as various dialectal and orthographic forms,

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from kindergarten teacher to university professor (vaspitac, vaspitač, vaspitačica, nastavnik, nastavnica, profesor, profesorka, profesorica, učitelj, učiteljica) – were excerpted, and a smaller randomly selected subsample was created for each. The concordances were also tagged for their connotation – neutral, positive, or negative.

Based on that material, through CAD, we have shown how teachers of different levels are conceptualized in public speech in the Republic of Serbia. Globally, they are presented as people who work hard at their jobs, despite numerous (un)expected obstacles.

Negatively coloured concordances concern the difficult position of educators, with some general, but also some specific challenges that certain groups of employees in the educational sector face. In this sense, inclusive education is mentioned in several subcorpora, and a theme emerges – educators are not satisfied with how much the system has prepared them for such work. Additionally, the concordances contain mentions of violent acts and malpractices in which employees were either victims or perpetrators. Sexualization and tabloidization are present in reporting on some female variants of these occupations. “Female” subcorpora are always more specific and, partly related to this, more negative. However, a similar tendency can be observed in the male vaspitac, i.e. in a less formal form, although the female counterpart was also evaluated more negatively. The influence of these factors of formality, specification and gender should be tested on a wider sample.

There is a hierarchy between the concepts behind the different lemmas, both in terms of working conditions, but also in the terms of the texts in which they are mentioned. Professors stand out in that they are often distant from what they are talking about – they are invited to express their opinion about a certain topic or present some data to the public. In this way, they are presented as “thinking” and neutral, while other educational workers are presented as “working”. This image is also influenced by frequency – professors, along with high-school teachers, are mentioned much more often than primary and kindergarten teachers, i.e. the former are privileged in terms of media space.

The feminine counterparts of all lemmas are less frequent than the neutral/masculine ones, which can partly be explained by their markedness. However, in some lemmas that denote female occupations, it can be observed that they are used in a neutral/general situation, so that the morphologically marked form takes on part of the meaning of the unmarked form. This is especially noticeable in the case of female kindergarten and primary school teachers.

Future research could go in two directions. Given that the corpus turned out to be much more complex and richer than we expected, it would be possible to conduct a separate study on individual lemmas or some of their groups, which could delve deeper into analysis of certain features listed here. Subcorpora for teachers of certain subjects could also be analyzed. The second direction concerns a similarly designed study, but repeated on a later – or, if possible, an earlier – sample. The results obtained could be compared with these in order to obtain a picture of historical changes in a certain period. This would be especially important, but also interesting, if the consideration includes critical periods in which teachers played an important role.

Keywords: education, discourse analysis, corpus linguistics

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