Real, Imagined, and Displayed Fragility
Vulnerable Positions and Positioning in Society
A Conference Series on Contradictory Discourses of Marginality

Call for Papers
Bremen-Turku-Warsaw-Stockholm Series on
Studies in Discourse and Contradiction
BTWS Series 2018–2021 ❙ #3 ❙
October 22.-24. 10. 2020 in Warsaw, Poland

General goals

A research network at the University of Warsaw, University of Bremen, Åbo Akademi University (in Åbo/Turku) and Stockholm University address questions of social positions and positioning in a conference series on contradictory discourses of marginality and demarginalizations.

Social positions and positioning stand in connection to linguistic practices of stance taking and staging, of making oneself heard. Questions of marginal or central membership in groups and mechanisms of belongings have a high significance in constituting voices of actors in emerging discourses. In these processes of positioning in the sense of stance taking and/or staging, contradictory discursive figurations become visible which often represent a challenge for modern democratic societies.

The goal of the conference series is to reach an understanding of contemporary discourses shaped by contradictory configurations through in-depth analysis. The conference series is also associated with the section *Discourses on Centrality and Marginality – Discourse Linguistic Agendas in Times of Contradiction* at the XIV. Congress of the International Association for Germanic Studies in Palermo, Italy (IVG 2020) and the European Research Network on Discourses of Marginality and Demarginalizations.

The third conference within the series will take place in Warsaw, Poland. With the following call we kindly invite you to hand in an abstract to participate in this event.

Real, Imagined, and Displayed Fragility: Vulnerable Positions and Positioning in Society - *A Conference Series on Contradictory Discourses of Marginality*

University of Warsaw, October 22nd- 24th 2020

This year's conference focuses on positions and positioning of vulnerability in emerging discourses and in conversational exchanges.

Vulnerability theories (for an overview cf. Gillespie 2008, Fekete/Hufschmidt 2016, Fineman 2017) are grounded in the deep changes of the human ecologies of our societies and in the sense of precarity and inequality that individuals feel in relation to mainstream groups and institutions. On the one hand, vulnerability is an intrinsic human condition related to our existence and being in the world— as thematized in recent studies about human fragility, body, and embodiment (for an overview see Schilling 1993, Holstein/Gubrium 2000). But on the other hand, the way vulnerability is felt and displayed depends on the way institutions create frames for resilience devices (for an overview see Greene 2002). As Travis exemplifies: "all bodies are vulnerable to illness; however, individuals may have a range of differing resources in order to mitigate the effects of illness. Thus, 'resilience' to illness and its effects are affected by laws on the cost, patenting, and distribution of drugs, the circumstances under which the state will pay for healthcare provision, the access to private healthcare afforded through agreement with employers, the care provided through private family arrangements, and the way these roles are recognised by the state" (Travis 2019: 304). Furthermore, an individual sense of being strong or being weak is widely dependent on the opportunity to join target groups which offer possibilities and feelings of belonging. In every situation in which individuals feel socially isolated (for example because of their non-normativity), positions of fragility open up. When people are fragile and exposed to attacks or even feel fragile, they try to find sustainment in groups and ideologies. Individuals and groups who feel fragile can make "vulnerability" their weapon for creating mechanisms of identification in a reversal of the relationship between the strong and weak, between oppressors and the oppressed, between the privileged and disadvantaged. An example of this would be "body positivity", in which a supposed flaw that leads to marginalization or to the self-perception of marginality is translated into a discourse position of empowerment.

The social positioning of being "weak" provokes a gamut of reactions which represent a challenge for our "solidarity societies": among them, the feeling that vulnerable subjects have to be "protected" leads to the position that these vulnerable subjects are "beyond" normally valid rules of society (for the notion of "vulnerability" in legal literature see Travis 2019) and ascribed a kind of "special status" which neutralizes regular social dialectics. This fact lead to a series of contradictions: in numerous cases, persons being perceived as "weak" or socially vulnerable (children, women, elders, people belonging to minorities, socially or physically disadvantaged people) are denied to speak out or even silenced. Silencing encompasses harassment or intimidation. Shaming and humiliation are targeted at vulnerable subjects to prevent them from speaking and at the same time deny the legitimacy of their speech. These acts are designed to "shut up" subjects when they raise issues that are not accepted or claim interactional roles that are denied them. A reversal of this position can be a staging of aggression and attacks (Bonacchi 2017) by vulnerable subjects who can claim for themselves special rights. Displaying one's own fragility at the level of conversational strategies ("I know, I am weak, but…", "I know, nobody cares about what I say but …") and even being silent and silencing can be a reactive as well as proactive behaviour which can give rise to forms of aggression and offence (Wardhaugh 1986: 234). In this perspective, studies on vulnerability can lead to important outcomes at the level of effective social risk management (Cardona 2004) and disaster prevention (McEntire 2004).

The concept of vulnerability opens up a series of infinite possible conjugations: victimization, fragility, weakness, disadvantage, being neglected, infantilized, ignored, excluded, and silenced. In all these declinations, vulnerability becomes the object of an appropriation through which those individuals potentially or actually wounded can now wound in a ransom impetus that disregards any logical justification, as shown in many cases in the last years (for example in Germany the rhetorics of the Reichsbürger or in Italy the rhetorics of the movement 5 Stars or Italian Brothers).

This leads to a series of (self-)presentation mechanisms at all levels that conference participants are called upon to describe in a wide range of manifestations: among them physical vulnerability, psychological vulnerability, social vulnerability, sexual and gender vulnerability, linguistic vulnerability, institutional vulnerability, verbal aggression.

Starting from these observations, we are interested in theoretical and empirical research that analyses contradictory discourses based on vulnerability positions and positioning. These positions can be expressed in agendas, arenas, and agencies (Spitzmüller/Warnke 2011): [1]

Agendas When are claims of vulnerable positions and positioning used strategically by individuals and groups for themselves or for others to gain rights, power, status or resources?

Arenas In which forums and through which media do individuals and groups negotiate their and others' belonging and stance as fragile individuals claiming special rights?

Agencies What are the possible options for actions arising from real, imagined, and displayed/staged vulnerability positions? Which are the apparatuses ('dispositives') and narratives of vulnerability?

The organisers approach these topics from an interdisciplinary linguistic perspective, and wish to invite researchers from all disciplines to contribute to disciplinary and interdisciplinary discussions. Not only linguists, but also psychologists, sociologists, philosophers, anthropologists, psychotherapists and psychoanalysts, educational and social scientists, literary and cultural studies scholars, scholars of law as well as artists are welcome to provide their contribution to our conference, which wants to reflect on the phenomenology of vulnerability positions and positioning in the whole gamut of its implications and manifestations, as well as on how far this phenomenon has to be linked to contemporary perspectives. The conference program will include lectures, working groups, and poster sessions. Students and doctoral students are welcome with contributions in various open formats (posters, films, photos, science slam, field work etc.).

The languages of the third conference in the series are English and German. We are currently inviting abstracts of up to 300 words for participation. Please send a PDF with your proposal to s.bonacchi@uw.edu.pl und beaschra@uni-bremen.de by email, together with a short biographical note and the titles of three of your publications no later than ~~14th of April 2020~~. ***1st of June 2020***. By ~~30th May 2020~~ ***1st July 2020*** you will be informed if your proposal was accepted.

Selected papers will be published in an edited volume with an international high-quality publisher.

Slots

The slots for the lectures are 30 minutes + 15 minutes discussion.

Confirmed Plenary Speakers:

Mitchell Travis (University of Leeds)
Michael Buchholz (International Psychoanalytic University, Berlin)
Pascal Nicklas (University of Mainz)
Tomasz Basiuk (University of Warsaw) & Carsten Junker (Technical University of Dresden)

Actual information: http://vulnerability2020.uw.edu.pl

Warschau – Bremen – Turku – Stockholm – Dresden, November 2019

Silvia Bonacchi – Ingo H. Warnke – Hanna Acke – Charlotta Seiler Brylla – Carsten Junker

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1 We would like to thank all participants of the conferences BTWS #1 in Bremen and BTWS #2 in Åbo/Turku who contributed with their ideas to delineate the topic for this third call for papers.

Literature

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Conference fees and payment

Until 31.7.2020: 300 PLN/70 EUR (regular), 150PLN/35 EUR (reduced, on demand), 80 PLN/20 EUR (PhD students), free (students, only 60PLN/15 EUR is demanded as contribution for catering costs). On demand it is possible to obtain an exemption from conference fees.

After 31.7.2020: 450 PLN/110 EUR, (regular), 250 PLN/55 EUR (reduced, on demand), 120 PLN/30 EUR (PhD students), free (students, only 60 PLN/15 EUR is demanded as contribution for catering costs).

On-site fee: 500 PLN/130 EUR

The payment can be done through bank account or through credit card (further information will be announced on our homepage: vulnerability2020.uw.edu.pl).