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Language and Gender: Research and  
Desiderata in German

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Desiderata” • Friday, May 31th 2024

# Structure

Part I: Current Situation in Germany

Part II: Special Focus:

German/English Comparison: *There is no “generic masculine” in English*

References

# Current Situation in Germany

# Current Situation

- High public interest in topics concerning language and gender
- Heavy political instrumentalisation
- Confrontational and non-consensual atmosphere and corresponding actions
  - Decrees by several state governments on the prohibition of “Gendersprache” in their sphere of influence (i.e. administration, schools and universities, all state authorities) (e.g. Bavaria, Hesse)
  - Popularity of non-academic and academic writings that take a negative stance against efforts for genderneutral language (e.g. Payr 2021, Meineke 2023, Trutkowski & Weiß 2023)

# Normative Issues

## Rat für deutsche Rechtschreibung

- Decision as of March 2021:
  - Neologisms are not included into the official rules for orthography.
  - They are not (yet) ratified as part of the official orthography.
- Decision as of July 2023:
  - Neographies are to be seen as „Sonderzeichen“ (special characters):  
„... Doppelpunkt (:), ... Asterisk (\*), Unterstrich (\_) oder andere Zeichen im Wortinneren verwendet. **Diese Wortbinnenzeichen gehören nicht zum Kernbestand der deutschen Orthografie.**“  
 (“... colon (:), ... asterisk (\*), underscore (\_) or other characters are used inside words. These word-internal characters are not part of the core of German orthography.”)
- <https://www.rechtschreibrat.com/>
- Cf. Hennig 2024 for a critical report of the work of the RfdR in this matter.

# New Academic Efforts

- Focus on new academic (linguistic) approaches to the topic
- No comprehensive overview
- Selected projects I am more less acquainted with and involved in

# Linguistic research on language and gender since 2019 (selection)

## How it started:

- Workshop „**AG 1: Kontraste und Oppositionen bei Genus und Geschlecht im Deutschen**“, 41. Jahrestagung der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Sprachwissenschaft, Universität Bremen, 06. – 08. März 2019 (organized by Gabriele Diewald & Damaris Nübling)
- Collective volume (open source):  
Gabriele Diewald & Damaris Nübling (Hrsg.) 2022. Genus – Sexus – Gender, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter. Open Access:  
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110746396>

# Content in *Genus – Sexus – Gender*

„Genus – Sexus – Gender“ – ein spannungs- und ertragreiches Themenfeld der Linguistik (Gabriele Diewald & Damaris Nübling)

Leben, lieben, leiden: Geschlechterstereotype in Wörterbüchern, Einfluss der Korpusgrundlage und Abbild der sprachlichen ‚Wirklichkeit‘ (Carolin Müller-Spitzer & Henning Lobin)

Ist Sharon Manager? Anglizismen und das generische Maskulinum (Kristin Kopf)

Von säugenden Affinnen und trächtigen Elefantenkühen – Zum Geltungsbereich der Genus-Sexus-Korrelation (Miriam Lind & Lena Späth)

Wohin mit Epikoina? – Überlegungen zur Grammatik und Pragmatik geschlechtsindefiniter Personenbezeichnungen (Andreas Klein)

Syntaktische Domäne oder lineare Distanz – welcher Faktor steuert semantische Kongruenz im Kontext von Hybrid Nouns und Epikoina in stärkerem Maß? (Anja Binanzer, Sarah Schimke & Silke Schunack)

Inkongruenz von Genus und Geschlecht in Nominalellipsen: Akzeptabilität und Asymmetrie (Berry Claus & Aline Willy)

Genus- und Sexuskongruenz im Mittelhochdeutschen: eine Paralleltextanalyse zum Lexical hybrid kind (Magnus Breder Birkenes & Jürg Fleischer)

Mann und Frau, Damen und Herren, Mütter und Väter – Zur (Ir-)Reversibilität der Geschlechterordnung in Binomialen (Anne Rosar)

Das Emma und der Hänsli: Genus-Sexus- Diskordanzen in Dialekten des Deutschen als Spiegel sozialer Geschlechterrollen (Simone Busley & Julia Fritzingler)

Ideologeme und Argumentationsmuster gegen genderneutrale Sprache in der spanischsprachigen und deutschen Linguistik (Lidia Becker)

„Ich denke, es ist sehr wichtig, dass sich so viele Menschen wie möglich repräsentiert fühlen“ (Ronja Löhr)



# Linguistic research on language and gender since 2019 (selection)

- Workshop at University Passau, October, 13-15, 2022: „Movierung. Formen, Funktionen – Bewertungen“ (organized by Alexander Werth)
- Volume [to appear] with de Gruyter

# Linguistic research on language and gender since 2019 (selection)

- Workshop AG 10 „Geschlechterbewusste Sprache: Routinisierte Gebrauch und kreative Neuförm“, DGfS-Tagung 8.–10.03.2023, Köln (organisiert by Damaris Nübling, Hannah-Charlotte Bröder, Lisa Zacharski & Paul Meuleneers)
- Volume in preparation: Special Issue of *Linguistische Berichte*

# In Sum

- The topic is booming.
- Specific issues dealt with (among others):
  - Generic masculinum
  - German/English Comparison
  - “Femininmovierung”
  - Relevance of experimental research
  - How to process the „Dritte Option“ linguistically : Neographies (neologisms), other means
- Many further workshops, research groups, planned larger projects

# Special Focus

German/English comparison: There is no „generic masculine“ in English

# Problems with New Gender Concepts

- Naming gap for the third option:
  - *Divers* (,diverse')
  - Not a designation for persons
  - Adjective with a fairly broad and general meaning
- Attempt of a solution:
  - Genderstar, gendergap etc.
- Not without problems
- Returning to the traditional usage (generic masculine) is not a solution.

# Public Debate

- Recent suggestion:
  - Take English as an example
  - Use the „generic masculine forms“ for inclusive language
    - e.g. *Lehrer* like English *teacher*
    - *Student* like English *student*
- Influential statements by Nele Pollatschek, a feminist writer of the younger generation

# The Generic Masculine as a Gender Neutral Form

## Pollatschek 2020

„Der englische Gedanke ist schlicht und ergreifend dieser: Der Weg zur Gleichheit ist Gleichheit. Wenn wir wollen, dass Männer und Frauen gleich sind, dann müssen wir sie gleich behandeln, auch in der Sprache. Jede sprachliche Sichtbarmachung von Geschlecht hebt das Geschlecht hervor, weist auf Unterschiede hin, betont, dass eben dieses Geschlecht so wichtig ist, dass es in jeder Lebenslage erwähnt werden muss, und **zementiert damit die Ungleichheit.**“

(Pollatschek 2020: 192)

["The English thought is simply this: the way to equality is equality. If we want men and women to be equal, we have to treat them as equal, also in language. Any linguistic visualization of gender highlights gender, points out differences, emphasises that this very gender is so important that it must be mentioned in every situation in life, and thus cements inequality." ]

# The Generic Masculine as a Gender Neutral Form

## Pollatschek 2020a

„Während die Deutschen sich für das permanente Benennen von Geschlechterunterschieden entschieden haben, haben die Briten sich entschieden, das Anzeigen von Geschlechtlichkeit so weit wie möglich zu vermeiden. Dafür haben sie mit typisch britischer Pragmatik, die Form gewählt, die ihre Sprache sowieso als generisch hergibt. Diese Form ist im Englischen, genau wie im Deutschen, identisch mit der männlichen Form, im Deutschen wird sie durchaus kritisch als „generisches Maskulinum“ bezeichnet.“

(Pollatschek 2020a)

[“While the Germans have opted for the permanent naming of gender differences, the British have decided to avoid displaying gender as far as possible. For this, with typical British pragmatism, they have chosen the form that in their language is generic. In English, just as in German, this form is identical with the masculine form, in German it is quite critically referred to as "generic masculine".“]

<https://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/deutschland-ist-besessen-von-genitalien-gendern-macht-die-diskriminierung-nur-noch-schlimmer/26140402.html>



# Reply to These Suggestions

- The "generic masculine" is not an "abstract", gender neutral form.
  - It is not the German speakers who decided to make gender distinctions visible all the time. It is **the linguistic system of German requiring a choice between grammatical oppositions**.
  - The German language is virtually obsessed by marking gender in its lexicon and its grammatical paradigms (Kotthoff & Nübling 2019: 19)
- Attempting to use German in a gender-fair way cannot ignore deeply entrenched linguistic distinctions.

# My Claim

- Not a good option
- English and German are not comparable in this field.
- English does not have a usage that could be compared to the „generic masculine“ in German.
- Some reflexions on gender in both languages and on linguistic structure representing it.

# Gender – Basic Notions

Corbett 2013

## Genderless languages – no gender system

- Gender is expressed lexically (e.g. in lexemes for *man*, *woman*) or through attributes such as *female*, *male*
- No morphologically expressed obligatory marking of gender.

## Natural gender languages – semantic assignment

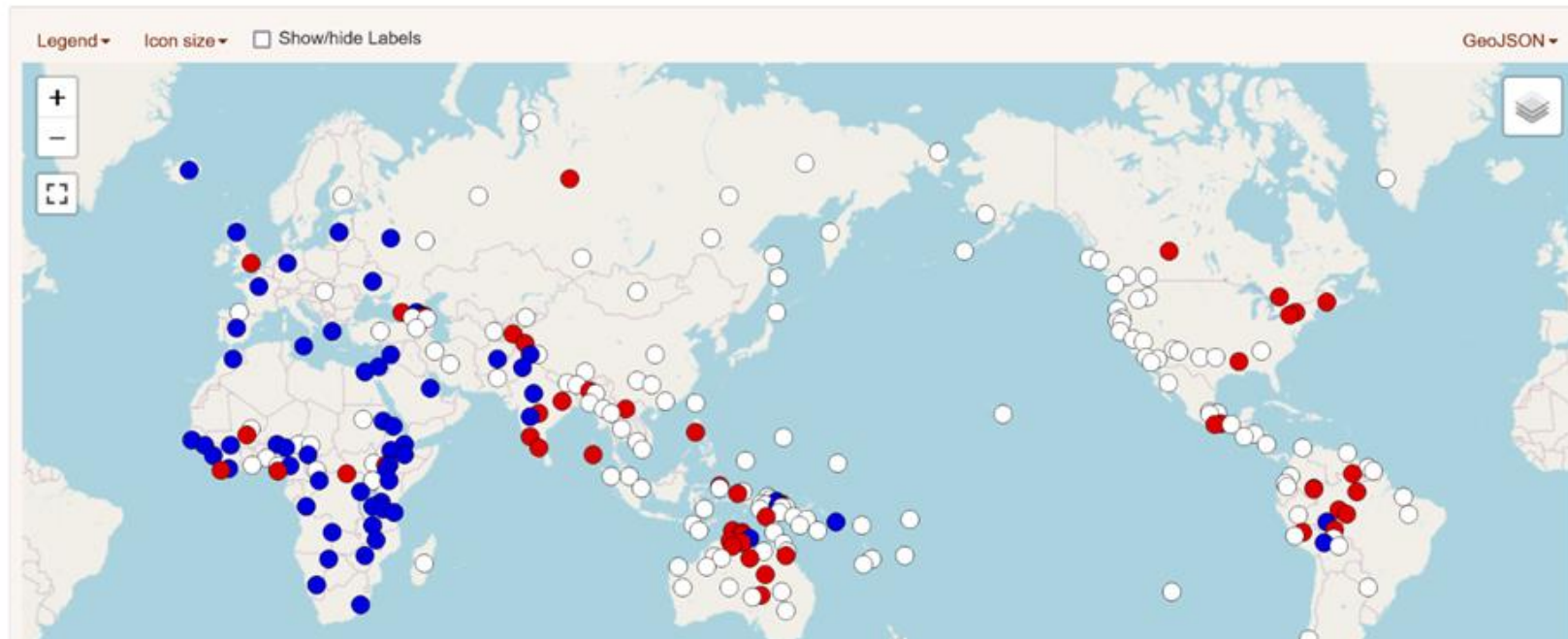
- Most nouns are gender-neutral but referential gender is expressed in personal pronouns (e.g. *he*, *she*, *it*).

## Grammatical gender languages – semantic and formal assignment

- Obligatory morphological (and or phonological) distinctions in nominal categories, e.g. German

# Gender – Basic Notions

Corbett 2013, WALS, Chapter 32: Map 32A. Systems of Gender Assignment



Value	Representation
○ No gender system	145
● Semantic assignment	53
● Semantic and formal assignment	59
<b>Total:</b>	<b>257</b>

# Gender in German

- Singular nouns are assigned one of the three gender categories
  - Masculine (*der Löffel* 'the spoon')
  - Feminine (*die Gabel* 'the fork')
  - Neuter (*das Messer* 'the knife')
- Gender is neutralized in plural nouns
  - *die Löffel* ('the spoons'), *die Gabeln* ('the forks'), *die Messer* ('the knives')
- Complex assignment rules: syllable structure, derivation, phonology, semantic fields
- No inherent meaning of gender categories

# Gender in German

## Exception

- Semantic arbitrariness of grammatical gender assignment in nouns does **not** hold for person names.
- Person names show **a strong correlation between grammatical gender and lexical gender.**
- Masculine correlates with semantic feature 'male':
  - *der Mann* ('the man'), *der Sohn* ('the son'), *der Bruder* ('the brother'), *der Onkel* ('the uncle')
- Feminine correlates with the semantic feature 'female':
  - *die Frau* ('the woman'), *die Tochter* ('the daughter'), *die Schwester* ('the sister'), *die Tante* ('the aunt')

# Gender in German

## Exceptions to the Exception – Hybrid Nouns

- Person names with a „mismatch“ of grammatical gender and lexical gender

Grammatical gender →	Masculine	Feminine	Neuter
Lexical gender ↓			
Female	der Vamp (‘the vamp’)		das Weib (‘the woman’) das Mädchen (‘the girl’)
Male		die Memme (‘the sissy’)	das Männlein (‘the little man’)

# Gender in German

## Gender Neutral Nouns (Epicene Nouns)

### Grammatical gender

- Obligatory
- Lexically fixed
- Any of the three gender categories

### No lexical gender feature

Grammatical gender	Lexical gender	Example
masculine	neutral	der Mensch 'the human being'
feminine	neutral	die Person 'the person'
neuter	neutral	das Kind 'the child'



# Gender in German

## Word Formation – Derivation

- Femininmovierung (‘feminine movation’)
  - Derivational suffix *-in*
  - From grammatically masculine, lexically male person names
    - Student / Studentin
    - Lehrer / Lehrerin
- Highly productive
- No derogatory connotation

# Gender in German

## Word Formation – Conversion

- Nominalisation of participles and adjectives
  - Adjective: *krank* ('sick')
    - > *der Kranke* ('the sick male person') / *die Kranke* ('the sick female person')
  - Participle I: *reisend* (*reisen* 'travel')
    - > *der Reisende* ('the male traveller') / *die Reisende* ('the female traveller')
  - Participle II: *abgeordnet* (*abordnen* 'delegate')
    - > *der Abgeordnete* ('the male delegate') / *die Abgeordnete* ('the female delegate')
- Highly productive
- No derogatory connotation
- Genderassignment according to referential (social) gender (Bußmann & Hellinger 2003: 150)

# What do we mean by „generic masculine“?

- A traditional usage convention of those **personal role names** that exists in the language in **paired forms** for denoting male and female referents:
  - *Autor-Autorin, Student-Studentin, Kunde-Kundin* ('author', 'student', 'customer')
- Traditional rule of usage:
  - Always use the masculine form for "mixed groups", for indefinite reference or generalized meaning.
    - *Die Lehrer treffen sich monatlich.* ('The teachers meet monthly')
    - *Der Kunde hat das Recht auf Rückgabe.* ('The customer has the right to return')
    - *In den Kitas fehlen Erzieher.* ('There is a lack of educators in the Kitas')

# English *student* ≠ German *Student*

	English	German
Lexeme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• One lexeme for role name</li><li>• Gender neutral in singular and plural<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>student /students</i></li></ul></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Two lexemes for role name</li><li>• Lexical gender via derivation</li><li>• Male / female distinction in singular and plural<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Student / Studenten</i></li><li>• <i>Studentin / Studentinnen</i></li></ul></li></ul>
Determiner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Genderneutral</li><li>• No number distinction<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>the (student)</i></li><li>• <i>the (students)</i></li></ul></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Number distinction</li><li>• Gender correlation in singular</li><li>• Gender neutral in plural<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>der (Student) / die (Studentin)</i></li><li>• <i>die (Studenten) / die (Studentinnen)</i></li></ul></li></ul>

# English *student* ≠ German *Student*

- English has **no grammatical morphology** (determiners, inflections) for gender distinctions: no grammatical gender.
  - There is no generic masculine in English.
- German has **obligatory grammatical paradigms** for gender distinctions in determiners which correlate with lexical gender in role names
- English has **no systematic derivational rule** for lexical gender distinction (some unproductive relics *actor / actress* etc.)
  - role names are per se gender neutral
- German has **systematic and productive** formatives and rules for the **derivation** of person names with lexical gender distinction
  - role names are lexicalized in pairs
  - choosing one means not choosing – eliminating – the other
  - Generic masculine: „Male as Norm“ (MAN)

# No Simple Transfer from English to German

- English and German are very different in terms of the inventory and rules of the linguistic system.
- It is not appropriate to equate certain forms of one language with seemingly similar forms of the other language.
- Superficially similar role names like English *student* – German *Student* are „false friends“.
- For best practice in gender-fair language use each language offers different possibilities.
- A simple transfer of forms, structural or usage patterns is not expedient.

Thank you very much!

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