

“Gendern nein danke” or “Gendern ist richtig und wichtig”? The impact of attitudes on the use of gender-inclusive language in German

Gender-inclusive language is currently a hotly-debated topic in several lingua-cultures, and one that divides opinions. While serious doubts about the generic masculine and its power to represent other genders arose as a topic of widespread public debate as early as the 1970s (cf. also psycholinguistic studies such as Braun, Gottburgsen, Sczesny & Stahlberg 1998), the topic has recently gained renewed interest, especially in Germany. Reasons for this recent interest in gender-fair language are manifold; one of importance being the 2018 Amendment to the Civil Status Act (*Gesetz zur Änderung der in das Geburtenregister einzutragenden Angaben*, Deutsches Bundesministerium der Justiz und für Verbraucherschutz 2018), which now legally recognises what is often referred to as a ‘third option’ in addition to the two binary genders. Even more recently, a legal opinion piece declared that the use of gender-inclusive language (especially the use of those forms representative of all genders, beyond male and female) represents a “specific implementation of fundamental rights [i.e. gender equality], to which everyone is constitutionally entitled” (cf. Lembke 2021: 102-103, translation by HB and SL).

In light of these unequivocal arguments, the questions remain: what does the general public think about gender-fair language use? And how do these attitudes impact actual language use? While research studies on German indicate that attitudes are becoming more positive and gender-fair language is being used more frequently over time (cf. e.g., Müller-Spitzer 2021), concrete evidence regarding these developments – as well as empirical data on their connection to each other – is largely missing. Consequently, this study explores the attitudes of native German speakers regarding gender-inclusive language and their impact on its use.

For this purpose, participants of two age groups (18-25 and 50+, ~100 participants per group) were first tasked with translating simple sentences from English to German that contained the English epicene pronoun *they* in its singular function. The English language provides a gender-neutral starting point, so that the participants are not exposed to gendered language before the task (which might influence their own use, cf. e.g., Koeser, Kuhn & Sczesny 2015). The translation format of the questionnaire allows for easy comparison of the sentences across groups. The participants were not made aware of the purpose of the study until after the translation task. They were then asked about their attitudes towards gender-fair language use through several rating tasks on a four-point scale and open-ended questions.

For analysis, participants were grouped into different genders, age groups, and according to their attitude rating. The answers to the open-ended questions were analysed qualitatively and used to complement the attitude ratings. This way, we were able to gain a more in-depth understanding of participants’ reasons and motivations for their reported attitudes. The sentences in the translation task contained nouns and pronouns which could either be translated with generic masculine or different variations of gender-fair language. The translated sentences were coded according to the different realisation strategies (cf. Diewald & Steinhauer 2019) and counted. The various participant groups were then compared in order to gain insights into the effect of age, gender, and attitudes on gender-fair language use.

For this apparent-time study, we hypothesised that younger people would report more positive attitudes towards gender-fair language than older people and that they would use gender-fair language more often than the older group. Furthermore, it was assumed that younger people would be more willing to use forms that include all genders, while older people might tend to use only binary inclusive forms. However, we also expected that positive attitudes towards gender-neutral language would not automatically lead to the use of gender-fair language in German, as several parts of speech must be marked for gender, making the use of gender-fair language especially difficult.

These hypotheses appear to be confirmed by our data analysis. Younger people rated gender-fair language as being slightly more important to them than older people. Among the participants who indicate negative attitudes, older people also expressed themselves much more strongly in the open-ended answers than younger people. Furthermore, the self-reported attitude ratings did not always match participants' use of gender-inclusive language: many participants who indicated that gender-fair language was important to them (or even indicated that "Die Übersetzung wurde, soweit möglich, geschlechterneutral vorgenommen" [the translation was done gender-fair, where possible]) did not use it in the translation task. In fact, most people used the generic masculine more often than neutral or inclusive forms. In this regard, the older group used the generic masculine more often than the younger group.

Moreover, people who did use gender-fair language did not always use it consistently, even within one sentence. Both observations indicate that the generic masculine is still often seen as the norm (as also stated by our participants, e.g., "männliche Form als Standard" [male form as standard]) and that the use of gender-fair forms is complicated and not everyone knows how to use them (e.g., "Ist auf deutsch nunmal sehr umständlich" [It's just really complicated in German]). A final important observation is that older people who did use inclusive language tended to prefer neutral forms or binary gender inclusive forms, while younger people did not shy away from using novel forms with gender-inclusive characters, such as the gender-star (which indicates a plethora of genders, cf. Kero 2019: 27; e.g., "Lehrer*innen"), which are a source of much controversy in Germany.

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