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Attitudes towards gender-fair language within German academia. Comparing positions adopted by university guidelines for gender-fair language with attitudes found amongst medical and gender researchers.

Central arguments for, and even more so, against gender-fair language have been the subject of scientific scrutiny since the early days of feminist linguistics (Blaubergs 1980; Hellinger 1985, 2000; Parks & Roberton 1998; Posch 2015). Research into the underlying attitudes of speakers followed suit (Parks & Roberton 2004, 2000; Sarrasin & Gabriel & Gygax 2012; Sczesny & Moser & Wood 2015) and showed that perspectives on gender-inclusive language are strongly influenced by institutional and social consensus.

In order to understand these complex intearctions, our attention was drawn to German universities as a high-profile institutional system. Our decision to focus on this source was motivated by the strong divergence between research results concerning universities and opinions on gender-fair language. On one hand, German students were found to have little interest in gender-fair language, which they considered irrelevant (Demarmels & Schaffner 2011), on the other, critics of gender-fair language see universities as the source of gender-fair language, often depicting it as an artificial elite project (Pettersson 2011) and simultaneously striving to discredit feminist linguistics while drawing on expertise from antifeminist campaigners inside universities (Ivanov, accepted). Furthermore, research into language change has shown that groups of speakers with high status, such as universities (cf. Aitchison 2013; Posch 2011) have an impact on linguistic change, as their language is widely perceived as exemplary. This adds another dimension to our research, raising the question of whether universities can actually be driving forces for gender equality (see Hodel et al. 2017 for interconnections between language use and gender equality).

In our research into attitudes towards gender-fair language at German universities and among researchers, we compared two sets of information. Firstly, we analyzed university guidelines for the implementation of gender-fair language as a baseline to establish their underlying attitudes towards gender-fair language and to see how they might influence the attitudes of the persons they are directed at. Secondly, we sent an online survey to researchers from the area of gender studies and to researchers working in medical professions, respectively, exposing the respondents with 8 positive and 13 negative statements towards gender-fair language as drawn from existing research, eliciting the researchers' attitude towards these statements as well as asking for elaborations or comments.

Attitudes found within current university guidelines were generally positive and advocated the use of gender-fair language. The vast majority of the guidelines were published by equal-opportunities offices. They were designed to promote gender-fair language and offered practical advice on different aspects of its use as well as providing background information. As a reaction to the heated controversies over the last decades, and in order to counter frequent points of public critique of gender-fair language (e.g. as unrealistic, complicated, and ugly), and also in order to empower the readers to a differentiated text production, the guidelines invested considerable efforts anticipating known points of critique and confronting them with relevant research to invalidate them. This, however, is not without problems.

In our survey, the majority of researchers from both fields indicated knowledge and appreciation of the guidelines offered by their respective institution. The attitude of the gender researchers was generally more positive towards gender-fair language, which was unsurprising, given the closeness of their work to the topic. Despite this slight imbalance a general support for gender-

fair language was found in both groups. However, there were also many points of critique raised amongst the respondents, which were mainly centered around questions of applicability but also of acceptance. The various attitudes expressed by the respondents of both groups were condensed into four main categories using a factorial analysis. They were all in the tradition of early discourses about gender-fair language.

Two of these categories capture attitudes against gender-fair language and can be summed up as (1.) a general scepticism of an interrelation between gender equality and language use and (2.) the concern about the increased effort and complications involved in producing gender-fair texts. The other two comprise generally positive attitudes towards gender-fair languages, (3.) agreeing in general terms to it being an important topic and (4.) judging the use of gender-fair language as both, already well established in society, and worthy of further pursuit.

Our research into attitudes towards gender-fair language at German universities highlights the ambivalent attitudes towards gender-fair language and illustrates the degree of disagreement about the topic currently found among all speakers of German. Our analysis also points to a function of (university) guidelines for gender-fair language as involuntary perpetuators of reservations against it. If gender-fair language is to be employed as a tool supporting gender balance, in-depth investigation of these findings by language and media didactics and by social psychology seems advisable.

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