

“Using gender-inclusive language is easier in German” or When Language Ideologies Meet Multilingualism

As in many other linguacultures, debates on gender-inclusive language have been heavily discussed in both Germany and France in the last ten years. While psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic studies have investigated how speakers of French and German position themselves towards gender-inclusive linguistic practices (see Burnett & Bonami 2019; Burnett & Pozniak 2021 for French; Diewald 2018 for German), which effects gender-inclusive language has on mental representations (Sczesny, Formanowicz & Moser 2016; see Brauer & Landry 2008 for French; see Schröter, Linke & Bubenhofer 2012 for German), and even offered practice-oriented recommendations (for instance Steinhauer & Diewald 2017; Stefanowitsch 2018 for German), the effects of multilingual practices on this question have remained largely unexplored — and this, despite early attempts to show the relevance of the intersection between gender, multilingualism, and second language acquisition (Piller & Pavlenko 2001).

This paper is a qualitative exploration of the language ideologies of Francophones living in Berlin based on twenty-five interviews with French-speaking women who learnt German in adulthood. In examining the complex interplay between migration, language acquisition, and attitudes towards gender-inclusive language in both French and German, I propose first answers to the research question raised by McLelland (2020: 119) in her introduction to a special issue on language standardisation studies: “Do speakers of different languages exhibit different degrees of attachment to a standard language ideology?”. Specifically, I show that speakers orientate towards a different understanding of ‘standard’ in French and German when it comes to gender-inclusive language. While almost all respondents have a positive attitude towards gender-inclusive language in all languages equally, they consider it to be unmarked and ‘natural’ only in German, their L2. I argue that this positioning can be explained by the fact that for my interviewees, the L2 is often learnt in specific social contexts without becoming associated certain types of speakers (in this case, well-educated, open-minded, cosmopolitans living in Berlin). As the participants often hear and read gender-inclusive practices in the academic or cultural context in Germany, they integrate gender-inclusive language as being ‘the norm’ in German, while it rather is one of the standards in the elitist professional and socio-cultural ‘bubble’ they use German in.

The findings based on the interview data show that language ideologies regarding gender are partly influenced by the acquisition of a second language, with some participants even stating they became familiar with gender-inclusive language and started using it in German, their L2, before they integrated it into French, their L1. I show that language ideologies play a more important role or are more deeply anchored in the L1 (in our case, French), while language-immanent arguments pertaining to language as a system are more frequent in the L2 (German). Against the background of the perceived, although largely exaggerated importance, of the Académie française as an authority figure when it comes to language matters (Estival & Pennycook 2011), using gender-inclusive language, while being favored in all cases, is viewed a mild form of political activism in language affairs in French. Interestingly, although critical (conservative, purist) debates gender-inclusive language are also present in the German public discourse, they are hardly received or are constructed as less problematic by the multilingual interviewees.

In conclusion, the paper opens new avenues on the intersection between language ideologies and gender by considering cross-linguistic influences and fully integrating multilingual speakers and their diverging views on gender-inclusive language in the many languages they inhabit.

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