

Supporting pair forms while criticising the asterisk – A questionnaire to measure potential differences in attitudes towards binary and nonbinary gender-fair language in German

The debate on gender-fair language in Germany is highly emotionally charged. Surprisingly however, dissent emerges not only between opponents and proponents of gender-fair language – but also amongst its proponents. As German is a grammatical gender language, all nouns carry a grammatical gender (masculine, feminine, neuter). Since numerous studies have shown that the use of the so-called “generic” masculine leads to an under-representation of women, feminist linguists have suggested binary gender-fair forms like pair forms (e. g. die Lehrerinnen und Lehrer – *teacher [pl. masc.] and teacher [pl. fem.]*) to heighten the visibility of women and reduce gender stereotyping (Stahlberg et al. 2007; Sczesny et al. 2016; Gygax et al. 2021). However, over the last decade, the increasing awareness of the need of an inclusive language also addressing people beyond a male-female dichotomy has led to criticism of binary gender forms (GFs) and suggestions of nonbinary GFs like the gender asterisk (e.g. Lehrer*in – *teacher*) (Diewald and Steinhauer 2017). Proponents of binary GFs aiming at increasing the visibility of women do, however, not necessarily support nonbinary GFs using special characters, but, on the contrary, often criticise their use. For example, linguists like Zifonun (2018) and Kotthoff (2020), but also the Association for German Language (Gesellschaft für deutsche Sprache e.V. 2020) dissuade from using the gender asterisk while advocating, for example, binary pair forms. This phenomenon, we argue, should be considered when conducting research on attitudes towards gender-fair language.

However, until now, no questionnaire takes potential differences between attitudes towards binary GFs and attitudes towards nonbinary GFs into account. Moreover, even though attitudes towards binary GFs have been shown to have an impact on participants’ preference of GFs (Steiger and Irmen 2007) as well as the processing of the “generic” masculine in contrast to binary GFs (Steiger-Loerbroks and Stockhausen 2014), recent psycholinguistic studies on nonbinary GFs have not considered potential differences between attitudes towards binary and nonbinary GFs (e.g. Friedrich et al. 2021; Körner et al. 2022). We have thus developed a questionnaire to be used in future research which, within a framework suggested by Parks and Robertson (2000), divides items in those testing attitudes towards binary GFs on the one hand and attitudes towards nonbinary GFs on the other (see table 1 for example items). The questionnaire as well as first results will be presented at the conference.

By now, the questionnaire was filled out by 164 participants: 60 students between 18 and 30 years of age, 57 persons with an academic background between 30 and 60 years of age, and 46 persons with a non-academic background between 30 and 60 years of age. Participants rated each item on a Likert-scale ranging from 0 to 9 with a higher score suggesting a more positive attitude towards the type of gender-fair language in question. Results show that attitudes towards binary GFs are generally more positive than attitudes towards nonbinary GFs. They moreover indicate that interindividual differences have a significant effect on different types of gender-fair language: Age had a significant effect on attitudes towards nonbinary GFs with younger people generally having a more positive attitude towards it. It moreover catches the eye that while there is a general positive correlation between attitudes towards binary and nonbinary GFs, older participants were more likely to be proponents of binary GFs while simultaneously having a less positive attitude towards nonbinary GFs (see figure 1). Interestingly, educational background did not have a significant effect on attitudes towards nonbinary gender-fair language in older participants. Additional data collection will shed further light on how interindividual differences influence attitudes towards different types of gender-fair language.

Table 1. Questionnaire: Attitudes towards Gender-fair Language. The table shows categories following a framework suggested by Parks and Robertson (2000) (beliefs, recognition, willingness), sub-categories to distinguish between attitudes towards binary and nonbinary gender-fair language as well as example items. Participants rated each item on a Likert-scale ranging from 0-9 with a higher score suggesting a more positive attitude. Items were inspired and/or adapted from Parks and Robertson (2000), Prentice (1994), Diewald (2018), Swim et al. (1995), Molin et al. (2021), Stahlberg and Sczesny (2001), and Braun et al. (1998) or formulated based on arguments raised in the debate on gender-fair language within Germany.

Category	Sub-Category	Example Item, Original	Example Item, Translated
Beliefs: Language	Binary	Formulierungen wie 'die Studenten und Studentinnen' machen Texte unnötig kompliziert und schlecht lesbar. (reversed item)	Formulations like 'die Studenten (students, plural masc.) und Studentinnen' (plural fem.) render texts unnecessarily complicated and hard to read. (reversed item)
	Nonbinary	Wenn ich den Begriff 'Lehrer*innen' lese, denke ich auch an Personen mit nichtbinärer Geschlechtsidentität.	When I read the term 'Lehrer*innen' I also think of persons who identify as being nonbinary.
Beliefs: Sexism	Binary	Die Diskriminierung von Frauen ist in unserer Gesellschaft kein Problem mehr. (reversed item)	Discrimination of women is no longer a problem in our society. (reversed item)
	Nonbinary	Es gibt nur zwei klar bestimmbare Geschlechter, männlich und weiblich. (reversed item)	There are only two clearly defined genders, male and female. (reversed item)
Recognition of sexist language	Binary	Der Wähler hat sich entschieden: Die CDU ist erneut die stärkste Partei.	The voter (sing. masc.) has decided: The CDU is, again, the strongest party.
	Nonbinary	Lieber Student, liebe Studentin, willkommen an unserer Universität!	Dear student (sing. masc.), dear student (sing. fem.), welcome to our university!

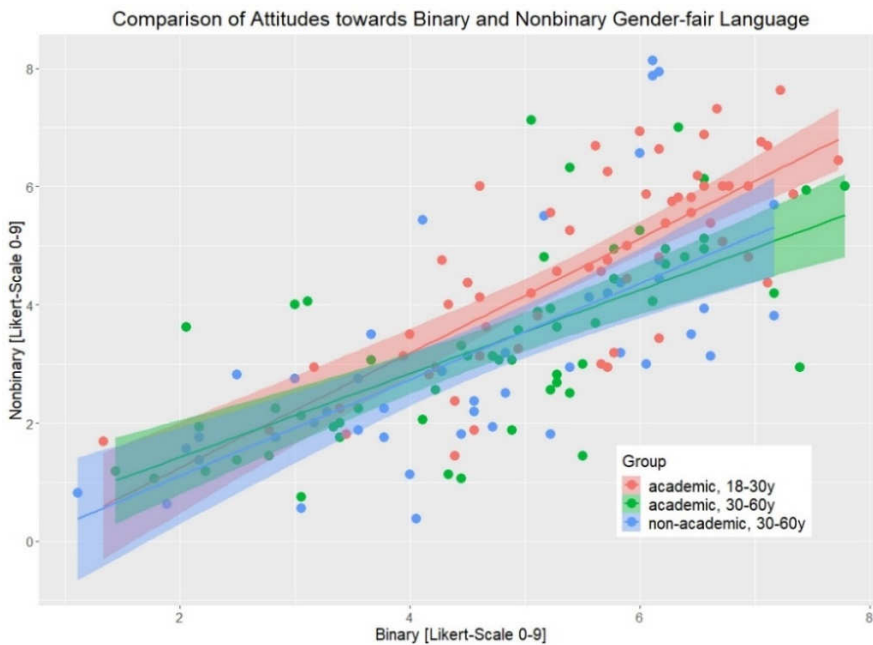


Figure 1. Comparison of Attitudes towards Binary and Nonbinary Gender-fair Language. Scores from 164 participants. Participants rated items on a Likert-scale ranging from 0-9 with a higher score indicating a more positive attitude towards the type of gender-fair language in question. Results indicate that younger participants generally have a more positive attitude towards nonbinary gender-fair language than older participants. Attitudes towards nonbinary and binary gender-fair language are generally positively correlated. Older people are, however, more likely to have a positive attitude towards binary gender-fair language while simultaneously having a less positive attitude towards nonbinary forms.

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