

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

Hanna Bruns, M.A.

Swantje Leiting, B.A.

Outline

1. Introduction
2. RQs & Hypotheses
3. Method
4. Results
 - Attitudes towards gender-inclusive language
 - Use of gender-inclusive language
5. Conclusion & Outlook

1. Introduction

Gender-Fair Language as Diversity Marker

- Non-generic nature of the generic masculine: illustrative example provided by Baron (2020: 5) on the topic of suffragettes: “Of course *he* is generic,[...]but not for voting.”
- Psycholinguistic studies confirm: generic masculine “leads adults to think about male referents more than female referents” (Noll, Lowry & Bryant 2018: 2)
- Legal Opinion for German: Gender-fair language represents a specific implementation of fundamental rights, i.e. gender equality, to which everyone is constitutionally entitled (cf. Lembke 2021: 102-103)

Gender Systems in English and German

- English = ‘natural’ gender language; gender marking only through pronouns and few nouns
- German = grammatical gender language; gender marking on pronouns, nouns, articles, adjectives
- Structural differences of the languages mean that “the use of gender-fair language is more challenging [in German] than in English” (Koeser, Kuhn and Sczesny 2015: 345).

Attitudes and Use (1)

- Alternatives to generic masculine often perceived as impractical because gender-neutral forms are seen as cumbersome, unnatural or artificial, and giving rise to misunderstandings (Irmén and Steiger 2005: 229; Heise 2000: 5)
- Women generally show a more positive attitude towards gender-neutral language than men (with a small difference) (Sarrasin, Gabriel and Gyga 2012: 118)
- Attitudes are changing, BUT: various sources find different results (Heise 2000: attitudes become more and more positive; Sarrasin, Gabriel and Gyga 2012: generally still negative)

Attitudes and Use (2)

- Dramatic shift in attitudes in the past roughly 5 years (cf. Diewald 2020, “Umkehrung der Rechtfertigungspflicht” / ‘Reversal of the obligation to justify’)
- Esp. for German, use of gender-neutral language is still far from the norm (Sarrasin, Gabriel and Gygax 2012: 114), speakers of German rarely use gender-neutral language (Koeser & Sczesny 2014: 549)
- Pilot study (Bruns 2018) found a tentative connection between attitudes towards gender-inclusive language and use

2. RQs & Hypotheses

Research Questions

1. **Which forms** do German native speakers **use** when translating neutral sentences from English to German (generic masculine, binary- inclusive forms, all-gender-inclusive forms)?
2. What are the **reported attitudes** of participants?
3. How do the factors **age**, **gender**, and **attitude** influence the strategies used in the translation task?

Hypotheses (1) – Attitudes

1. Younger people show **more positive attitudes** towards gender-inclusive language and **use** gender-inclusive forms **more often** than older people (cf. Adamski 1976, Baker 2010)
2. Women and diverse (not binary) people show **more positive attitudes** towards gender-inclusive language and **use** gender-inclusive forms **more often** than men (cf. Sarrasin, Gabriel and Gygax 2012)

Hypotheses (2) – Use

3. People with **positive attitudes use** gender-inclusive language **more often**
4. Generic masculine forms are **still the most often used** forms (cf. Koeser & Sczesny 2014)
5. When using inclusive forms, **older people** tend to use more **binary-inclusive forms**, while **younger people** tend to use more **all-gender-inclusive forms**
6. People using inclusive forms do **not always use them consistently** (cf. Bruns 2018)

3. Method

Questionnaire & Participants

- 9 easy sentences to translate from English to German
 - 5 of those completely gender-inclusive with singular *they*, only these were analysed for this presentation

e.g. A therapist is supposed to be helpful to their patient.

- Afterwards: Questions on attitudes and use of gender-inclusive language (4-point-scale and open ended)
- 193 participants

	Old (48+)	Young (17-26)
D	1	3
F	57	67
M	35	30
Total	93	100

	Old	Young
Paid	50	50
Not Paid	43	50

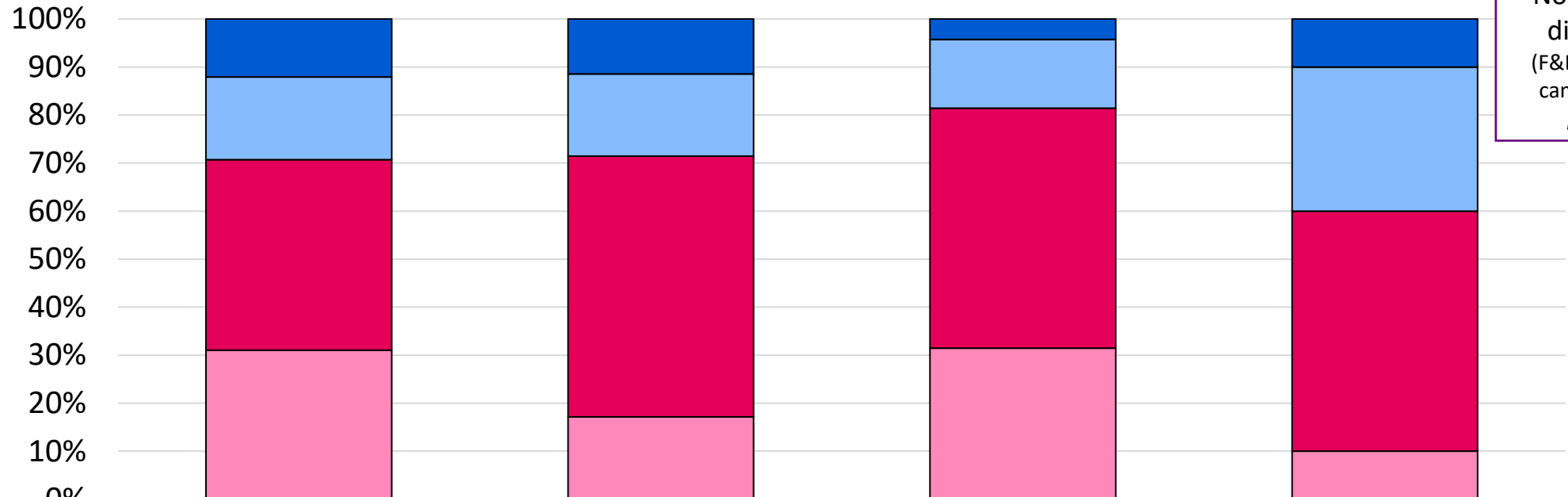
Coding

General category	Abb		Specific implementation	Abb	Example
Generic Masculine	GM		singular generic masculine	S-GM	<i>der, ein Lehrer</i>
			plural generic masculine	P-GM	<i>Lehrer</i>
(Only) Binary Inclusive	BI		splitting	SPLIT	<i>der oder die, Lehrer und Lehrerin, Lehrer bzw. Lehrerin</i>
			forms with slash (both with or without hyphen)	SLASH	<i>der/die Lehrer/in, Lehrer/-in</i>
			forms with brackets (both with or without hyphen)	BRACK	<i>der(die), Lehrer(in), Lehrer(-in)</i>
			intermediate capital I (Binnen-I)	B-I	<i>LehrerInnen</i>
All Gender Inclusive	Non-visible	GI-NVS	neutral forms	NF	<i>Lehrkraft, Schulkind</i>
			participle	PART	<i>Studierende, Lehrende</i>
			avoidance	AVOID	<i>Personen die lehren, replacement of specific pronoun with the, plural of pronouns</i>
			abstraction	ABST	<i>die Schule, die Professur</i>
	Visible	GI-VS	gender star	STAR	<i>der*die, Lehrer*innen</i>
			colon	COL	<i>der:die, Lehrer:innen</i>
Generic Feminine	GF		singular generic feminine	S-GF	<i>Eine Lehrerin</i>

4. Results

Attitudes towards gender-inclusive language

Attitudes towards gender-inclusive language



No significant differences (F&D vs. M young came close with $p = 0.051$)

	Old		Young	
	F&D	M	F&D	M
■ Objectionable	7	4	3	3
■ Not Important	10	6	10	9
■ Sometimes	23	19	35	15
■ Important	18	6	22	3

Language specific gender issue

- *Ich habe mich gefragt, ob ich gendern sollte, da die Verbindung zwischen grammatischem und sozialen Geschlecht im Englisch anders ist als im Deutschen. (Y_F031)*
 - (I wondered if I should gender because the connection between grammatical and social gender is different in English than in German.)
- *Ich fand es schwer zu erkennen, welches Geschlecht der Rezipient aufweist. (Y_F032)*
 - (I found it difficult to identify the gender of the recipient.)

Singular *they*

- *as there are no common neutral pronouns like they/them in German I tried to avoid the use of any (Y_F003)*
 - *Singular- und Pluralformen wurden fälshlich gemixt (O_F087)*
- (Singular and plural forms were falsely mixed)

Rules

- *Ich wünsche mir eine klare Definition, neutral und einfach zu beschreiben (O_M073)*
→ (I would like a clear definition, neutral and easy to describe)
- *Solange neutrale Sprache nicht grammatisch falsch ist, habe ich nichts dagegen. (O_F027)*
→ (As long as neutral language is not grammatically incorrect, I have nothing against it.)
- *Sprachnormen können nicht von Autoritäten vorgeschrieben werden. (Y_F062)*
→ (Language norms cannot be prescribed by authorities.)

Linguistic economy

- *Es widerspricht dem. Gesetz der Spracheffektivität. (O_F002)*
→ (It contradicts the Law of Language Effectiveness.)
- *gendern wurde zu Gunsten des Bearbeitungstempos verzichtet (O_M058)*
→ ('gendering' was dispensed with in favour of the speed of processing)
- *Nicht wichtig, da es einen Satz nur unnötig kompliziert gestaltet. (Y_M082)*
→ (Not important, as it only makes a sentence unnecessarily complicated.)

Aesthetics

- *Im formalen sprachlichen habe ich damit kein Problem. Im normalen Alltag ist es eher hinderlich und zieht die Sprache unschön auseinander. (Y_M075)*
→ (I have no problem with this in formal language. In normal everyday life, it is more of a hindrance and pulls the language apart in an ugly way.)
- *Es ist prinzipiell wichtig, allerdings gibt es da Abstriche, wo es zu Lasen des Stils geht. Man sollte eine Sprache nicht 'verhunzen'. (O_F079)*
→ (In principle, it is important, but there are some drawbacks when it comes to style. One should not 'butcher' a language.)

Generic masculine as norm

- *Kurz gefasst benutze ich sie nicht sondern rede 'normal'. (Y_M070)*
→ (In short, I don't use them but talk 'normally'.)
- *Geschlechtergerechte Sprache zwingt mich zu hinterfragen, warum ich die männliche Form als 'Standard' betrachte. (Y_F036)*
→ (Gender fair language forces me to question why I consider the masculine form as 'standard'.)
- *I went with the 'male' version in German, because to me it gives off a neutral vibe. It doesn't necessarily mean that I'm only talking about men. (Y_F060)*

Inclusivity

- *gleich beim ersten Satz entschieden: ok ich mach das jetzt geschlechtersensibel, weil korrekt (O_F075)*
→ (decided right at the first sentence: ok I'll make this gender-sensitive now, because correct)
- *Diese 'die Frau ist mit gemeint' finde ich absolut furchtbar und würde andersherum nicht auch nicht akzeptiert werden. (Y_F061)*
→ (I find this 'the woman is meant also' absolutely terrible and it would not be accepted the other way round either.)
- *Generell sollte die Sprache mehr Spielraum für verschiedenste Geschlechtsidentitäten bieten. (Y_F024)*
→ (In general, language should offer more room for diverse gender identities.)

Current topic

- *Gendern ist 'in'* (O_F038)

→ (Gendering is 'in')

- *ja klar, altes und zugleich brandaktuelles Thema* (O_F075)

→ (Yes, of course, an old and at the same time highly topical issue.)

- *Mit den Debatten sind mir die Unterschiede immer mehr aufgefallen* (Y_F047)

→ (Due to the debates, I have noticed the differences more and more)

Ideology

- *Gendern ist richtig und wichtig. Wir müssen alle Menschen mit unserer Sprache repräsentieren, denn Sprache schafft Realität.*
(Y_F022)
→ (Gendering is right and important. We need to represent all people with our language, because language creates reality.)
- *Sprache ist ein Ausdruck tieferer Glaubensüberzeugungen und Umstände. Sie drückt sowohl das Denken aus und beeinflusst es auch.*
(Y_F068)
→ (Language is an expression of deeper beliefs and circumstances. It both expresses and influences thought.)

'Whataboutism'

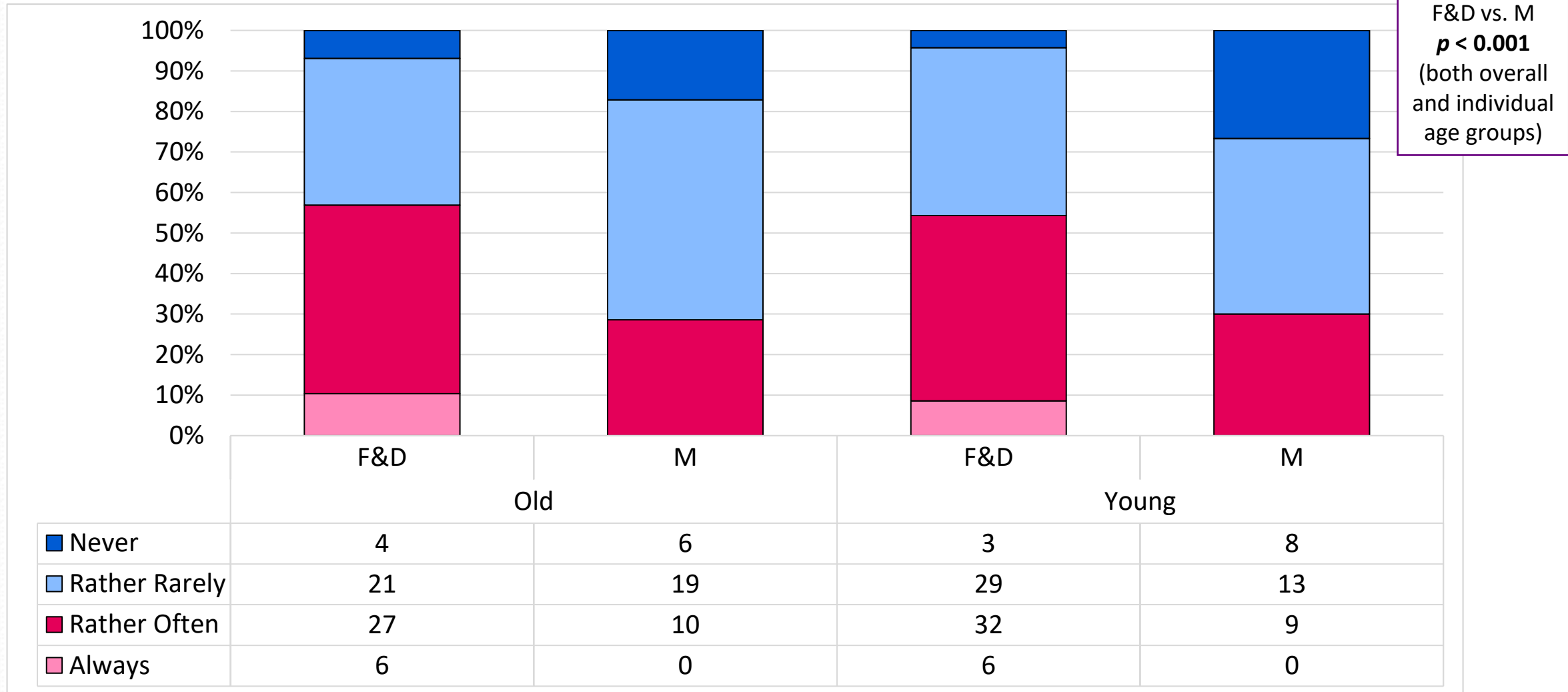
- *Die Menschheit hat gerade wichtigere Themen zu lösen als die Genderfrage. (O_F022)*

→ (Humanity has more important issues to solve right now than the gender question.)

- *dass die Frau dem Mann in vielen Bereichen noch untergeordnet ist, finde ich, kann man nicht durch die Sprache ändern, sondern durch Taten. (Y_F032)*

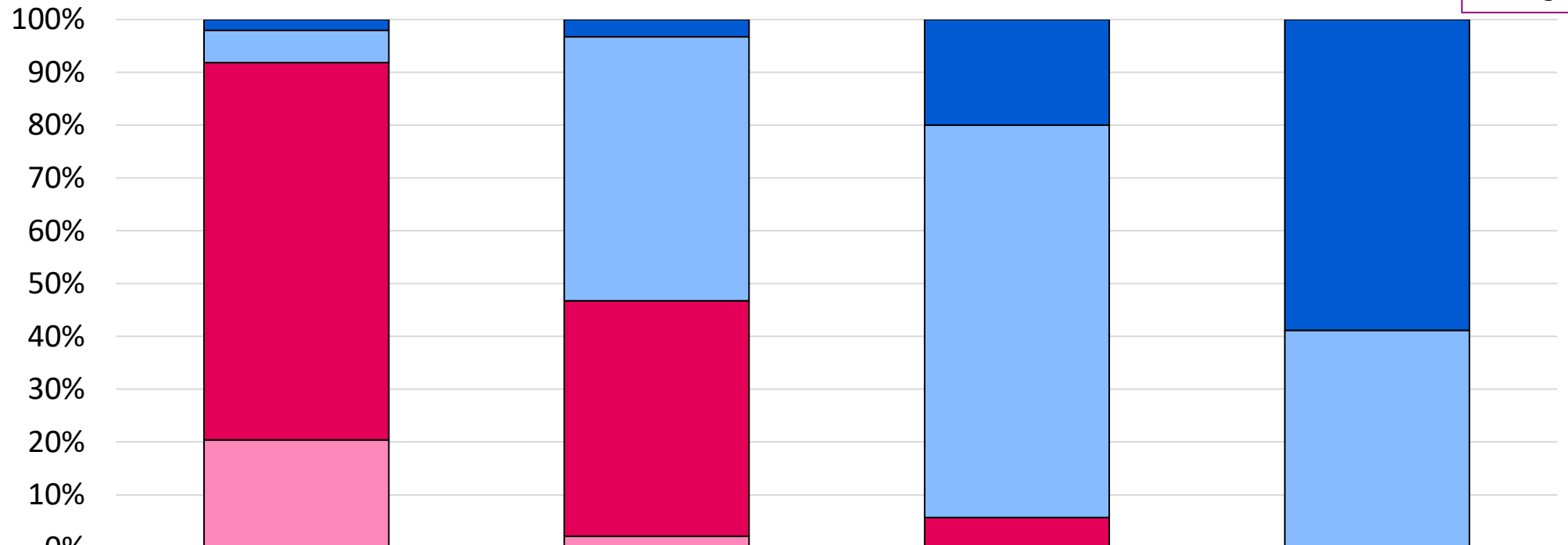
→ (I think that the fact that women are still subordinate to men in many areas cannot be changed through language, but through actions.)

Self-reported use of gender-inclusive lang.



Self-reported use according to attitudes

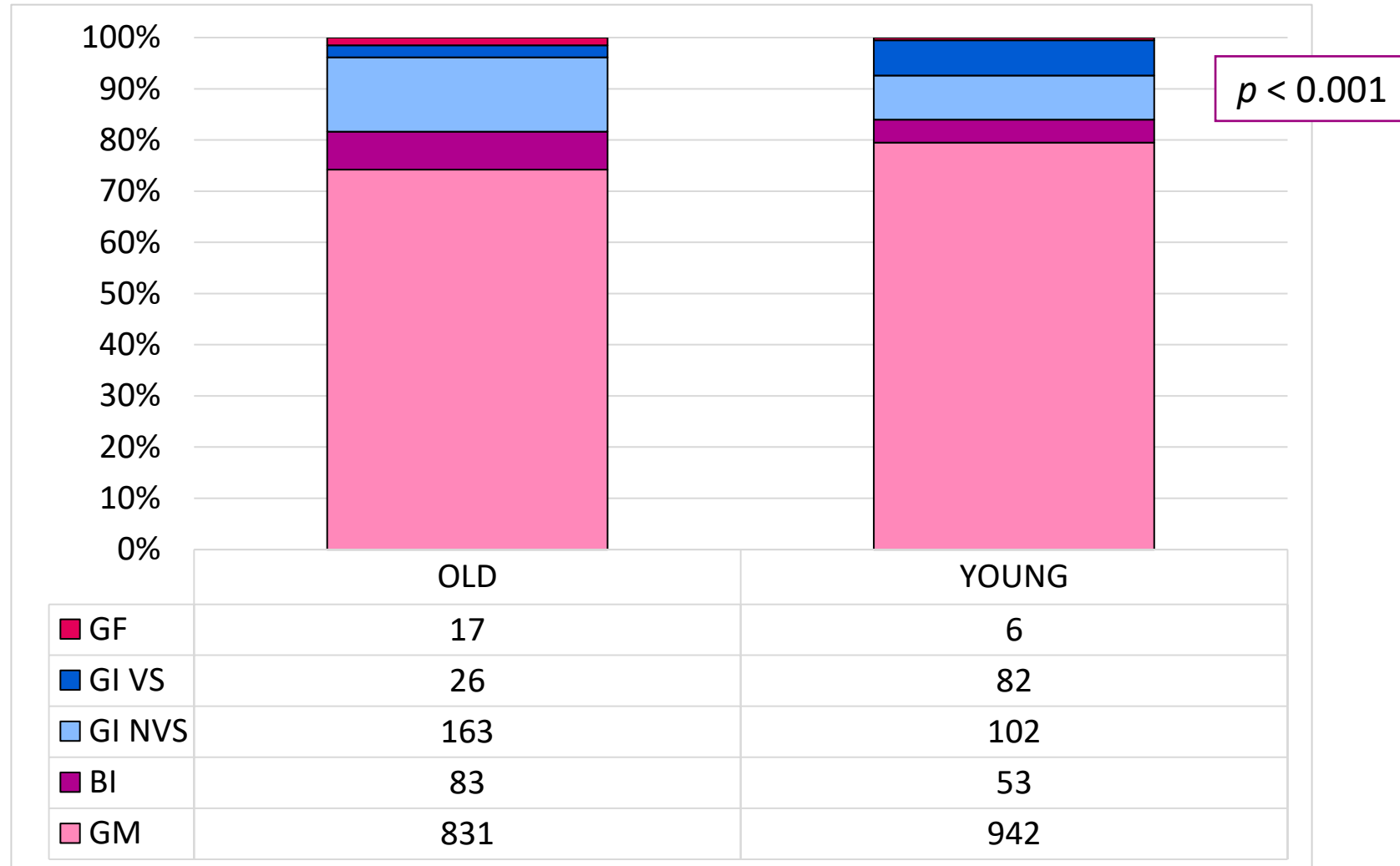
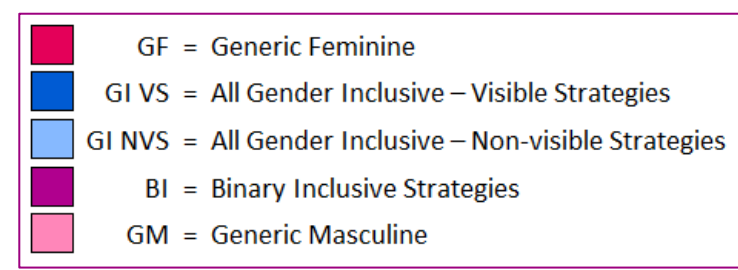
$p < 0.001$
(both overall and individual attitude groups)



	Important	Sometimes	Not Important	Objectionable
■ Never	1	3	7	10
■ Rather Rarely	3	46	26	7
■ Rather Often	35	41	2	0
■ Always	10	2	0	0

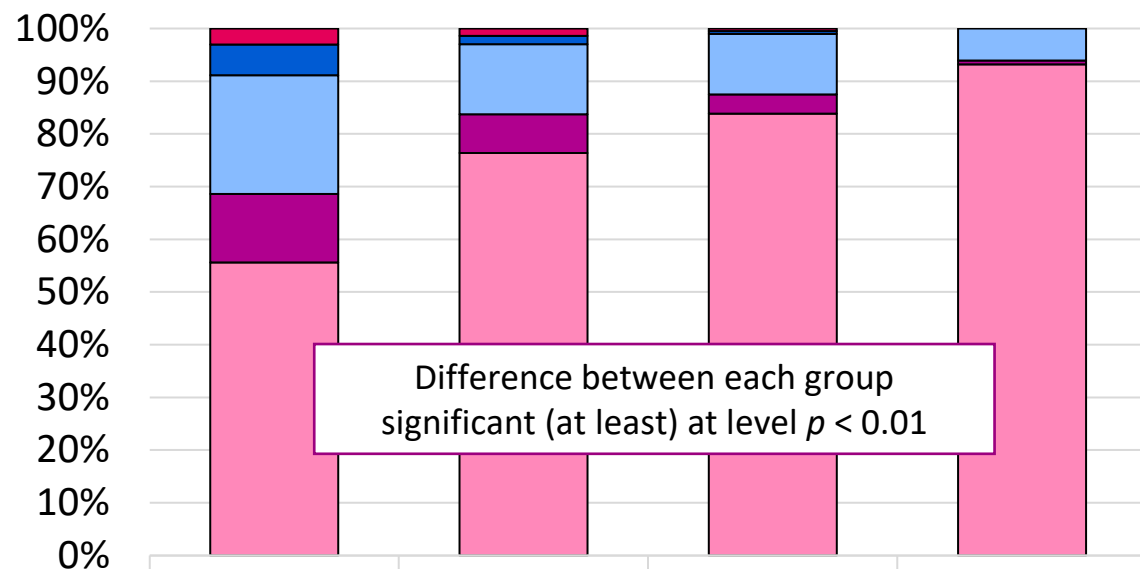
Use of gender-inclusive language

Strategies used / O vs. Y



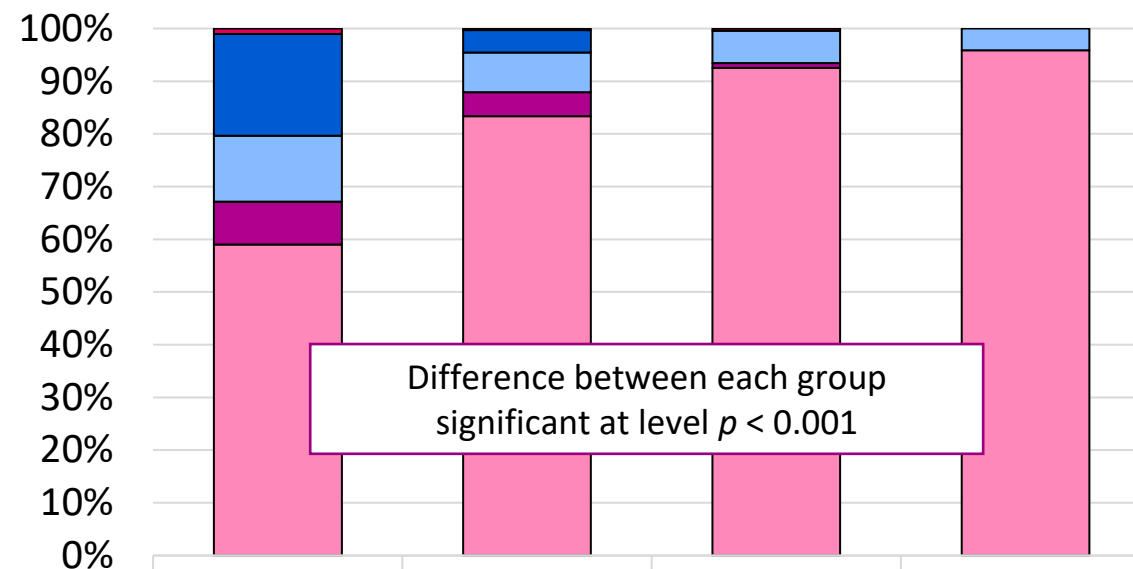
Strategies used / attitude groups

Older



	Important	Sometimes	Not Important	Objectionable
GF	9	7	1	0
GI VS	17	8	1	0
GI NVS	66	67	22	8
BI	38	37	7	1
GM	163	384	161	123

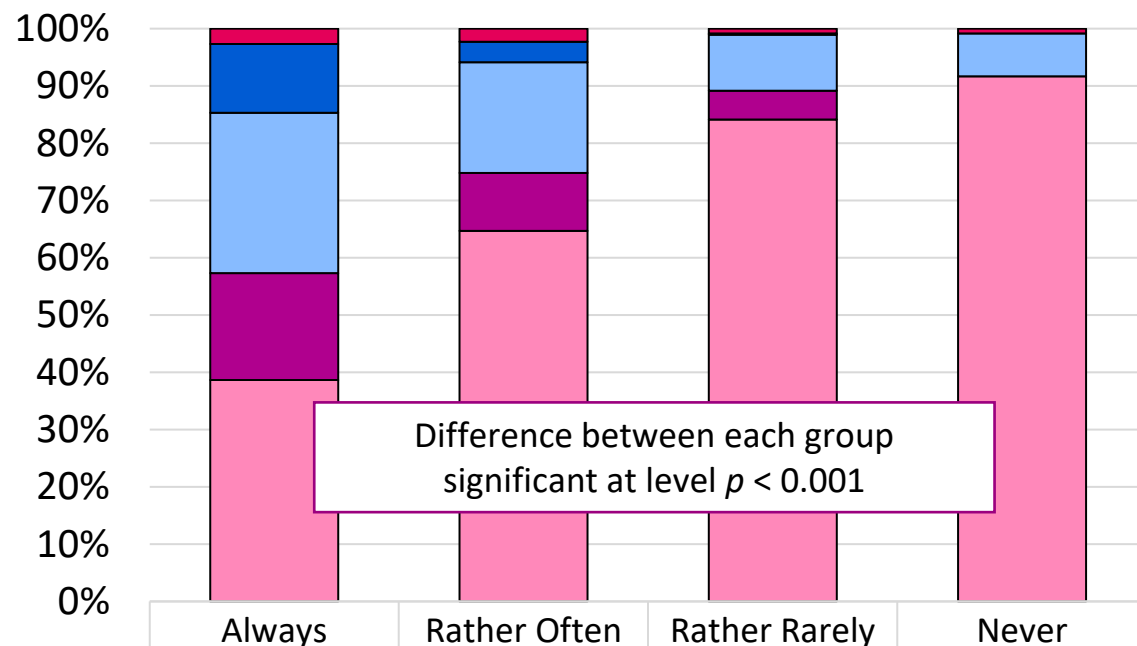
Younger



	Important	Sometimes	Not Important	Objectionable
GF	3	2	1	0
GI VS	57	25	0	0
GI NVS	37	45	14	3
BI	24	27	2	0
GM	174	495	211	69

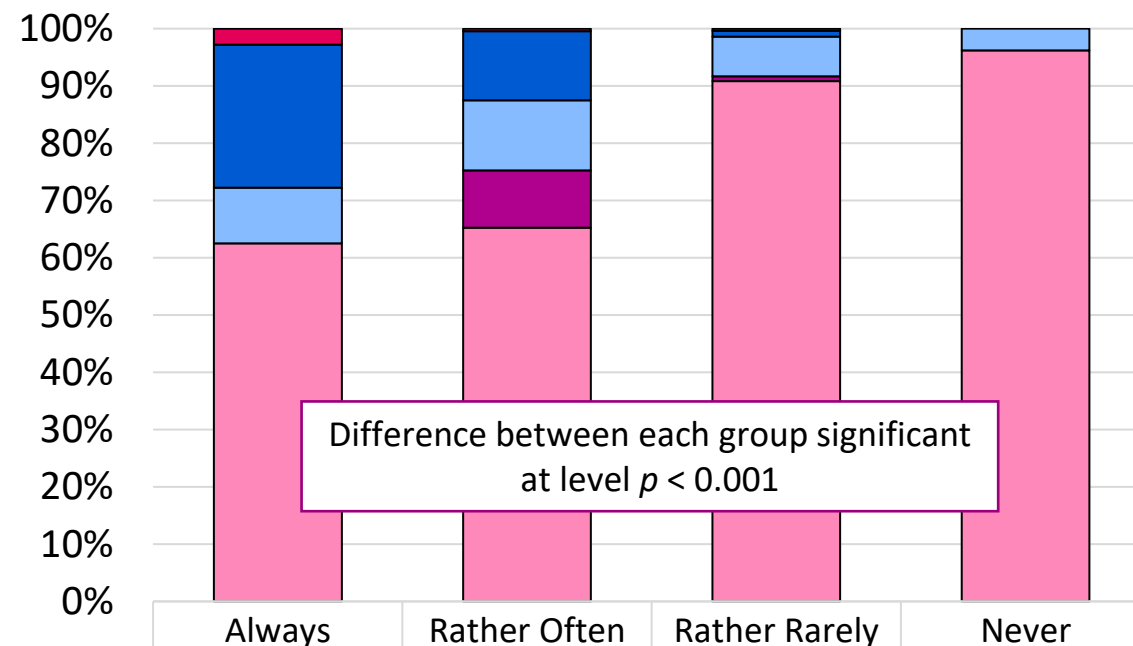
Strategies used / self-reported use

Older



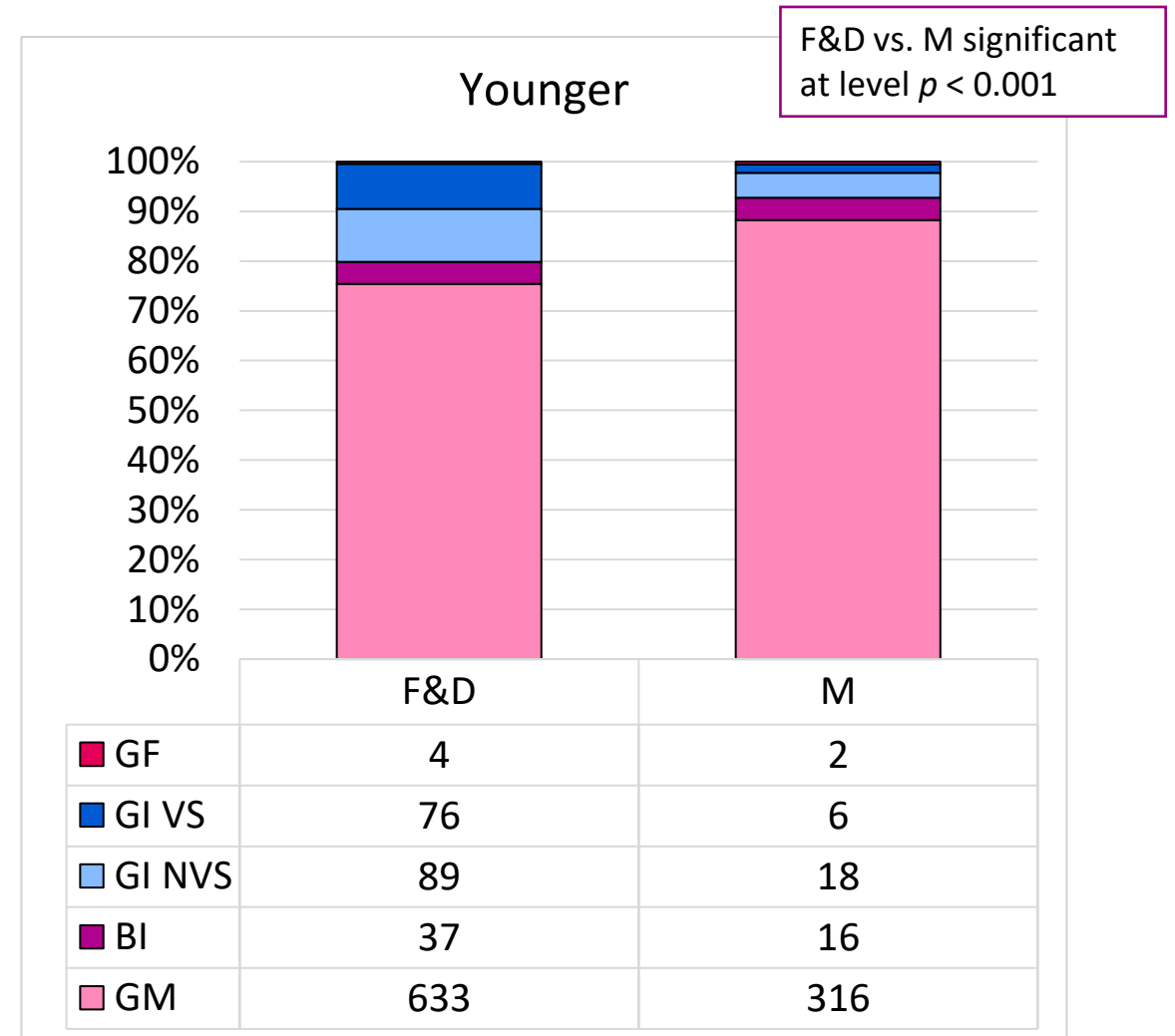
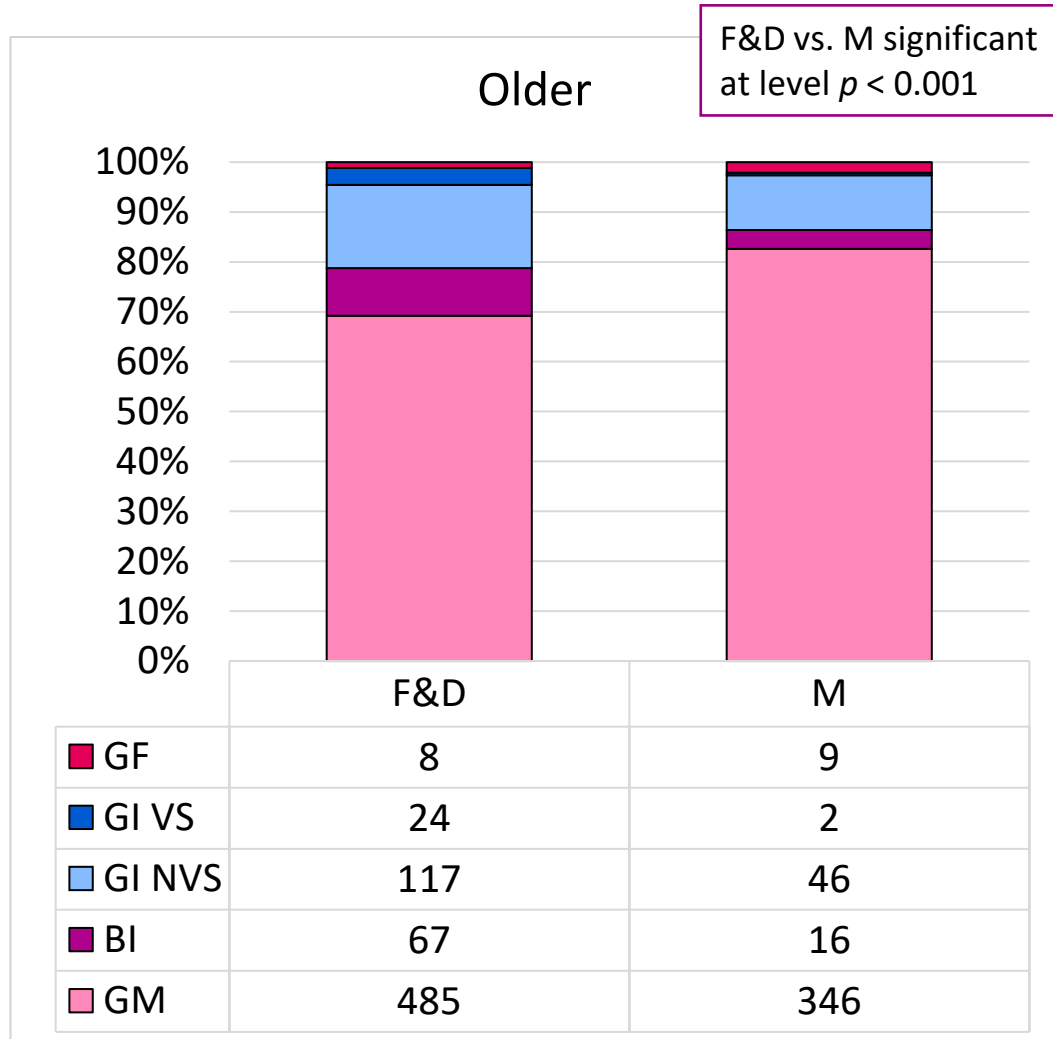
	Always	Rather Often	Rather Rarely	Never
GF	2	10	4	1
GI VS	9	16	1	0
GI NVS	21	86	47	9
BI	14	45	24	0
GM	29	288	404	110

Younger



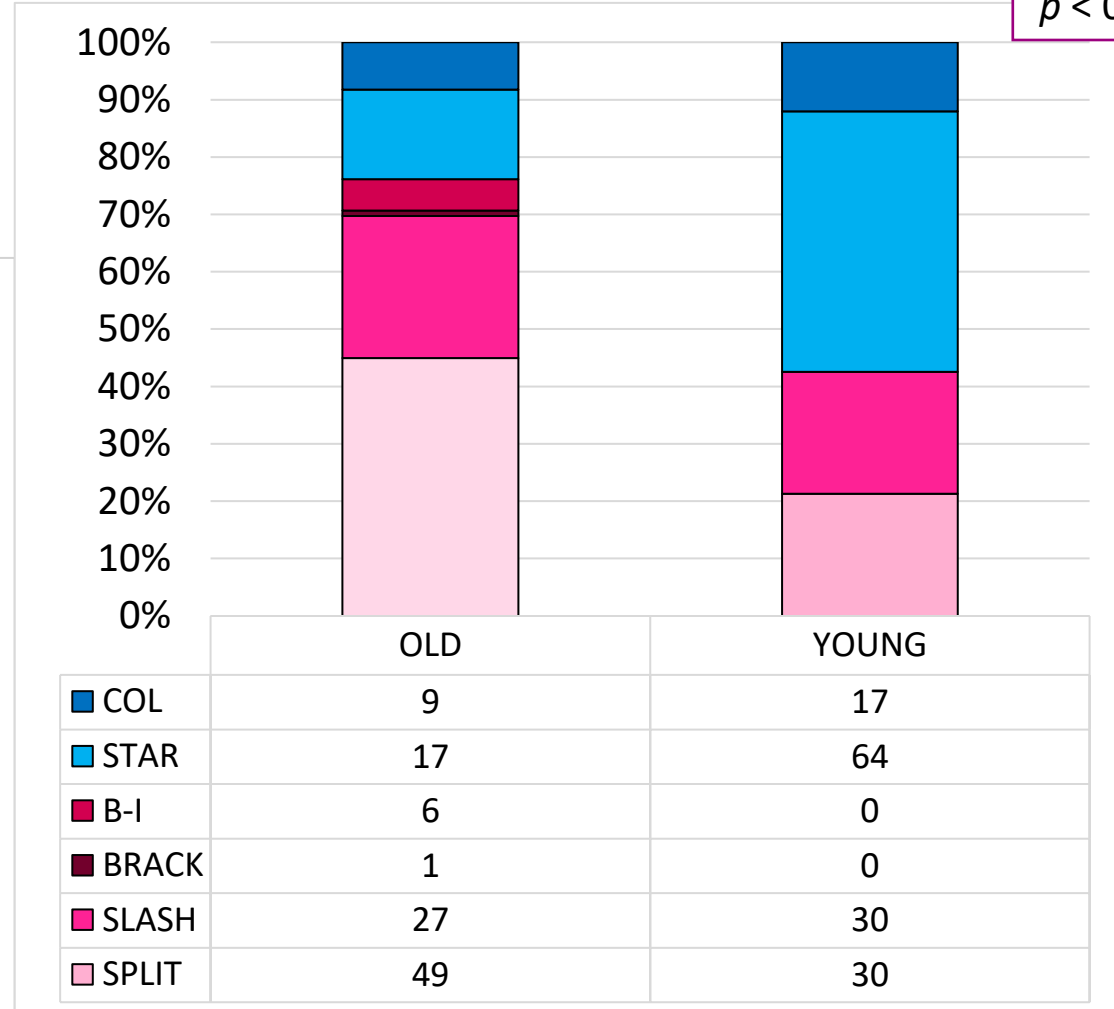
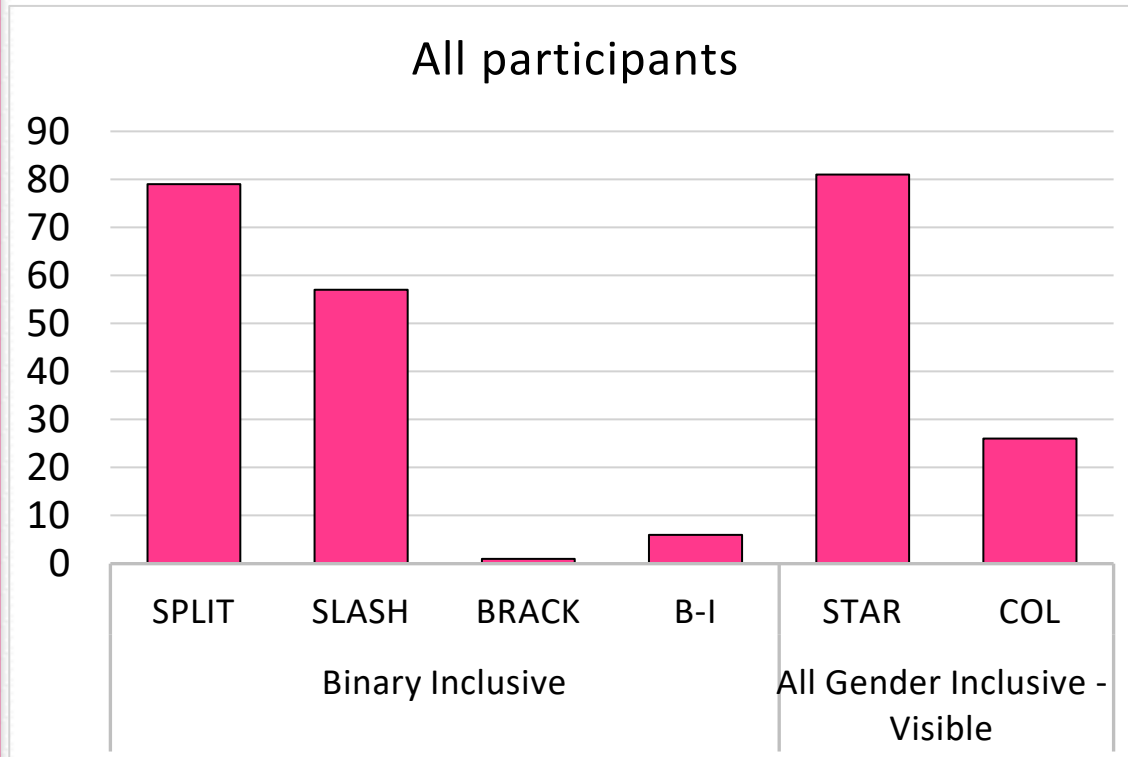
	Always	Rather Often	Rather Rarely	Never
GF	2	2	2	0
GI VS	18	59	5	0
GI NVS	7	60	35	5
BI	0	49	4	0
GM	45	319	458	127

Strategies used / gender



Gender-inclusive forms – specific implementations

$p < 0.001$



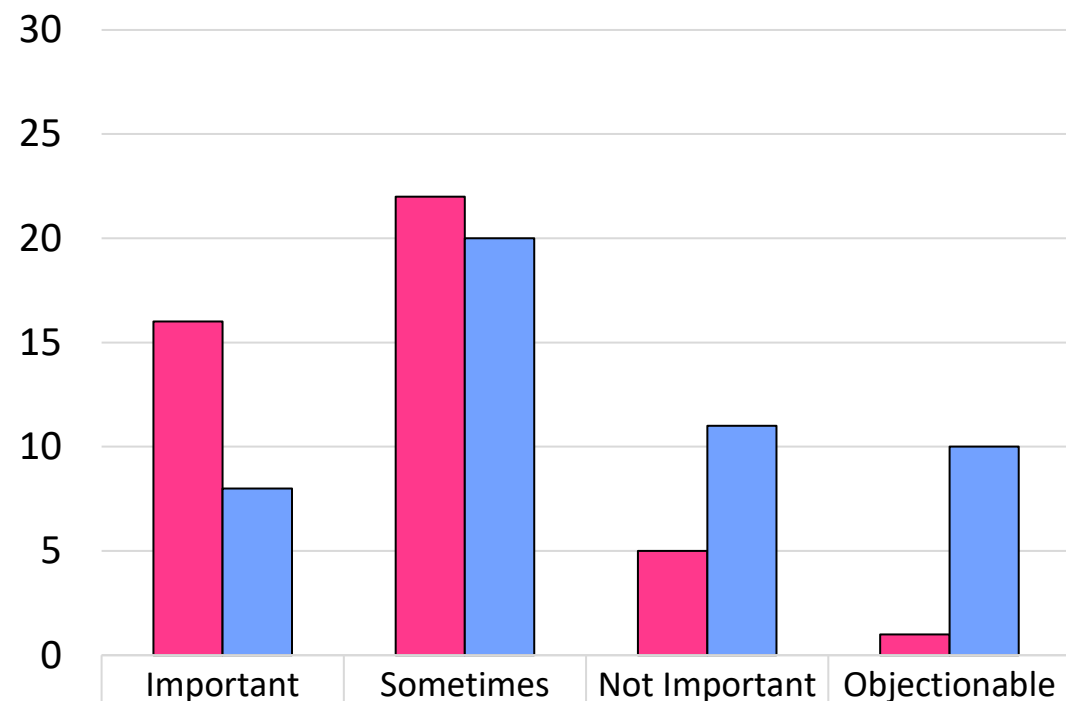
Non-consistency of forms

- *Ein*e Therapeut*in sollte **ihrem** Patienten/**ihrer** Patientin helfen. (O_F031)*
- ***Ein** Schriftsteller*in muss **seinen/ihren** eigenen Schreibstil finden um erfolgreich zu sein. (O_F042)*
- ***Ein*e Therapeut*in** sollte **ihrem/seinem Patienten** eine Hilfe sein. (Y_F067)*
- *Ein Autor oder eine Autorin **müssen** ihren eigenen Stil entwickeln um erfolgreich zu sein. (O_M051)*
- ***Eine Lehrperson** sollte immer gut für **seinen** Unterricht vorbereitet sein. (Y_F021)*

Payment / Attitudes unpaid and paid groups

Older

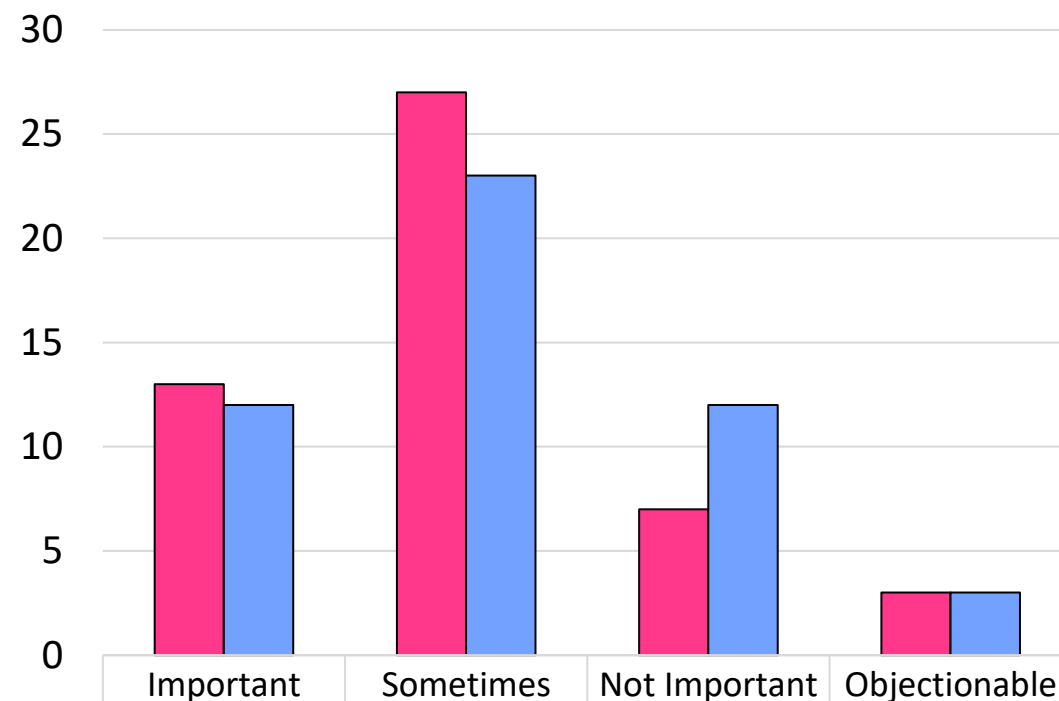
($p = 0.053$)



Unpaid	16	22	5	1
Paid	8	20	11	10

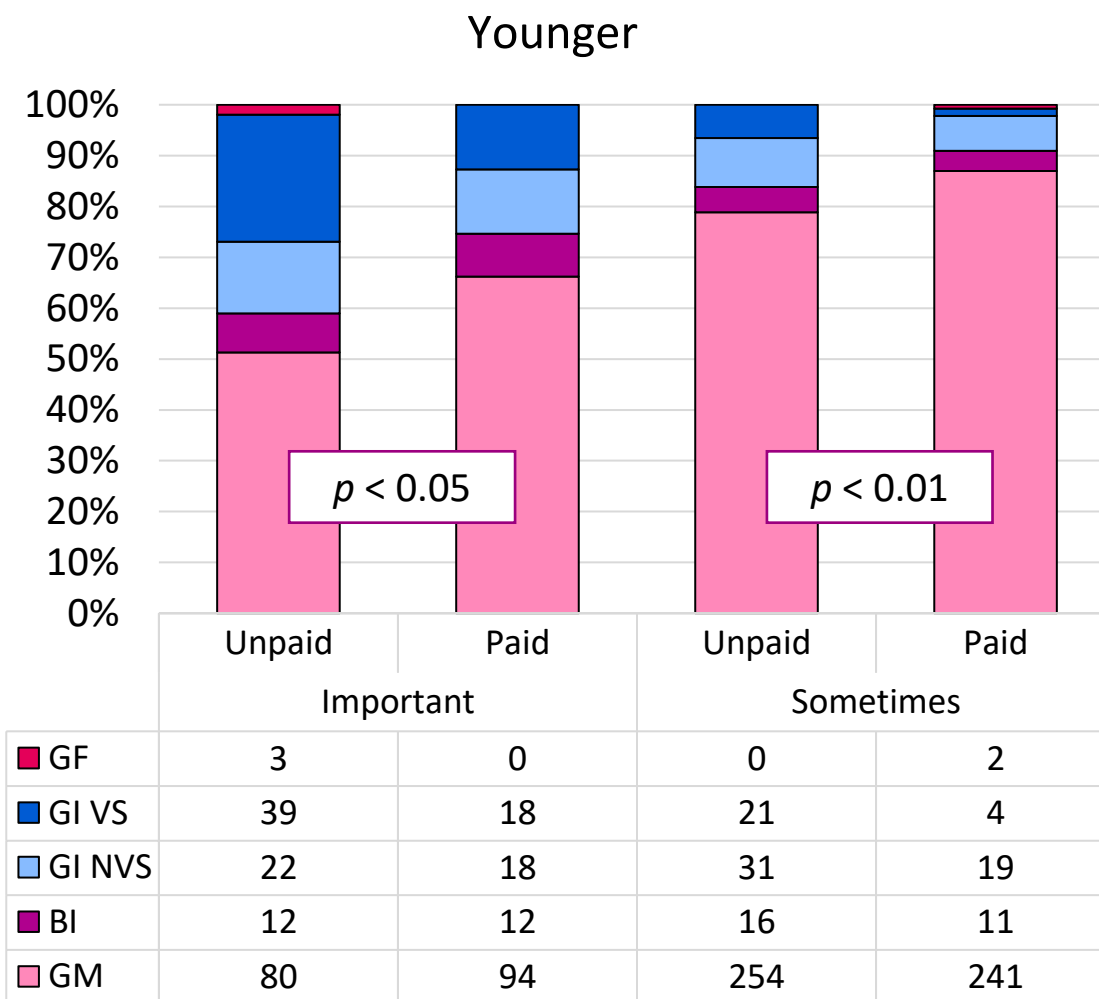
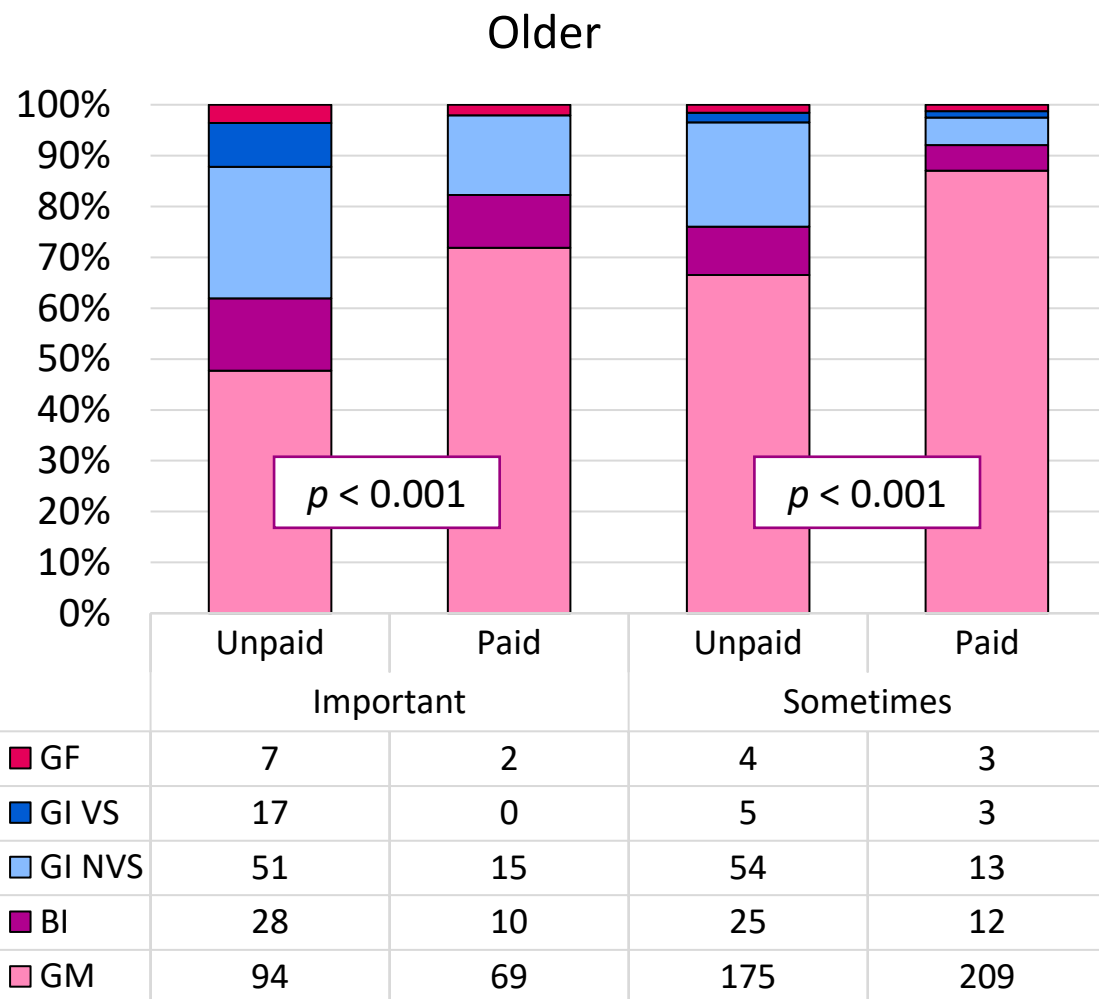
Younger

($p = 0.64$)



Unpaid	13	27	7	3
Paid	12	23	12	3

Payment / Use of strategies



5. Conclusion & Outlook

Conclusion (1)

- Hyp. 1:
 - Older vs. younger people **do not** show significant differences in reported **attitudes**
 - Older vs. younger people **do** show significant differences in **use** of inclusive strategies
- Hyp. 2:
 - Women and diverse people vs. men **do not** show significant differences in reported **attitudes**
 - Women and diverse people vs. men **do** show significant differences in **use** of inclusive strategies
- Hyp. 3:
 - People with **positive attitudes do use** gender-inclusive language significantly **more often**

Conclusion (2)

- Hyp. 4:
 - Generic masculine forms are **still the most often used form** across all groups
- Hyp. 5:
 - When using inclusive forms, **younger people** use **significantly more all-gender-inclusive** forms than older people
- Hyp. 6:
 - People using inclusive forms **rarely use them completely consistently**
- People under (perceived) time-pressure (i.e. paid) use significantly less inclusive forms
- Recent language change: Pilot study (Bruns 2018) revealed no use of *All Gender Inclusive – Visible* Strategies

Outlook

- A more qualitative analysis of the comments → possibly discourse analytic approach
- A close and more consistent analysis of (non-)consistency of use of gender-inclusive forms
- Inclusion of more *diverse* people (i.e. non-cis participants)
 - Look us up at the DGfS conference in Cologne next March
- A closer look into comparisons of paid/unpaid participants (might necessitate other data)
- Analysis of the other sentences from the translation task that made use of other pronouns (generic *he, he or she*)

References

- Adamski, C. (1976). *Changes in pronominal usage among college students as a function of instructor: Use of she as the generic-singular pronoun*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (84th, Washington, D.C., September 3–7, 1976).
- Baker, P. (2010). Will Ms ever be as frequent as Mr? A corpus-based comparison of gendered terms across four diachronic corpora of British English. *Gender and Language*, 4(1), 125–149.
- Baron, D. (2020). *What's your pronoun? Beyond he & she*. New York: Liveright Publishing.
- Braun, F., Oelkers, S., Rogalski, K., Bosak, J., & Sczesny, S. (2007). „Aus Gründen der Verständlichkeit ...“: Der Einfluss generisch maskuliner und alternativer Personenbezeichnungen auf die kognitive Verarbeitung von Texten. *Psychologische Rundschau*, 58(3), 183–189. <https://doi.org/10.1026/0033-3042.58.3.183>
- Bruns, H. (2018). *“This is a tedious issue in German” – The influence of equivalence and attitudes on gender-neutral language in translation* [unpublished Term Paper]. University of Bonn, Germany. (available via request)
- Diewald, G. (2020). *Sprachwandel und gesellschaftlicher Wandel – eine enge Verbindung*. Online guest lecture, University of Greifswald, 19 October 2020.
- Heise, E. (2000). Sind Frauen mitgemeint? Eine empirische Untersuchung zum Verständnis des generischen Maskulinums und seiner Alternativen. *Sprache & Kognition*, 19, 3–13.
- Irmen, L., & Steiger, V. (2005). Zur Geschichte des Generischen Maskulinums: Sprachwissenschaftliche, sprachphilosophische und psychologische Aspekte im historischen Diskurs. *Zeitschrift für germanistische Linguistik*, 33(2–3), 212–235.
- Koeser, S. & Sczesny, S. (2014). Promoting gender-fair language: The impact of arguments on language use, attitudes, and cognitions. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 33(5), 548–560. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0261927X14541280>
- Koeser, S., Kuhn, E.A., & Sczesny, S. (2015). Just reading? How gender-fair language triggers reader's use of gender-fair forms. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 34(3), 343–357.
- Lembke, U. (2021). *Geschlechtergerechte Amtssprache: Rechtliche Expertise zur Einschätzung der Rechtswirksamkeit von Handlungsformen der Verwaltung bei Verwendung des Gendersterns oder von geschlechtsumfassenden Formulierungen*. Berlin: Humboldt-University.
- Noll, J., Lowry, M., & Bryant, J. (2018). Changes over time in the comprehension of *he* and *they* as epicene pronouns. *Journal of Psycholinguist Research*, 47, 1057–1068
- Sarrasin, O., Gabriel, U., & Gygax, P. (2012). Sexism and attitudes toward gender-neutral language: The case of English, French, and German. *Swiss Journal of Psychology*, 71(3), 113–124. <https://doi.org/10.1024/1421-0185/a000078>

Thanks for listening.

Questions?
Comments?
Ideas?

Hanna Bruns, M.A.

h.bruns@uni-bonn.de

Swantje Leiting, B.A.

s5swleit@uni-bonn.de

Extra: Some of our favourite comments (1)

- *Gendern war mir in diesen Sätzen nicht möglich, da ich nicht wusste ob es gewünscht wird. (O_F014)*
- *ich finde auch Leute die das als extrem störend empfinden sollen sich nicht so anstellen und sollten mal überlegen warum das so ein riesen Geheule geben muss um nur ein Paar Worte mehr zu sagen um respektvoller zu sein. Leute die sich darüber aufregen sind meiner Erfahrung nach meistens Männer. (Y_F068)*
- *Als ich in einer Seminarveranstaltung vor Jahrzehnten ausschließlich weibliche Formulierungen benutzte, reagierten nach etwa einer Viertelstunde die männlichen Teilnehmer gereizt, ob sie gemeint sein. (O_F087)*

Extra: Some of our favourite comments (2)

- *Das ist eine politische Frage. [...] Das heisst, dass man auch in Bezug auf Gleichberechtigung, Chancengleichheit etc. dauerhaft aufmerksam und wehrhaft bleiben muss, wenn es nicht wieder dazu kommen soll, dass Frauen 'ja automatisch mit gemeint' sind bis zu dem Punkt, wo sie dann 'Huch?!?' doch nicht mit gemeint sind, wenn es um Chancen, Rechte oder Freiheiten geht. Geschlechtergerechte/-neutrale Sprache ist daher ein Alltagsmittel, um genau diese 'Awareness' sicher zu stellen. (O_F080)*
- *Vorschlag zur Befriedung des Themas: Verwendung des generischen Femininums für die nächsten 100 Jahre, danach wechseln alle 100 Jahre. (O_M057)*

Extra: Some of our favourite comments (3)

- *Ziel müsste dabei sein, dass gendergerechtes/-neutrales Sprechen (eine kurze Pause für den ':' stört den Sprachfluss keineswegs) witzig und 'sexy' rüberkommt und nicht verkrampft 80er-Jahre-feministisch. So, dass wer nicht gendergerecht/-neutral spricht oder schreibt, quasi altbacken wirkt. (O_F080)*
- *es hat die letzten Jahrzehnte ohne geklappt und nur weil 1 von 200.000 sich ausgeschlossen fühlt.. Da will man nur der Minderheit was Recht machen und vergisst dass sie nicht mal eine Mehrheit bilden können(bei weitem) (Y_M070)*