



**UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI**

# Gender exclusive and inclusive language in Finnish: Usage and attitudes

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# Gender in Finnish

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- Finnish is 'genderless' but not 'gender neutral'
- No gendered pronouns, but lexicon still gendered
- (-)*mies* (man) very productive as epicene
  - Joka *miehen* oikeudet (every *man's* rights)
  - Occupational titles, e.g. *esimies* (supervisor/foreman), *palomies* (fireman)
- Similar feminine constructions rare, but exist, e.g. *lentoemäntä* (stewardess; literal: flight hostess)
- Other gendered expressions, e.g., *mie-h-istö* (crew[+masc]), *miehittää* (to man); but also e.g. *äidinkieli* (mother tongue), *tytäryhtiö* (daughter company)

# Motivation & Research questions

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- Inclusive language initiatives fairly recent (Aamulehti, 2017)  
→ language users are still divided
- Understudied topic in Finnish (Engelberg, 2016)

## **Main research questions:**

1. Do Finnish speakers use exclusive or inclusive language?
2. Do Finnish speakers find exclusive language acceptable?
3. What type of attitudes do Finnish speakers have towards exclusive/inclusive language use?

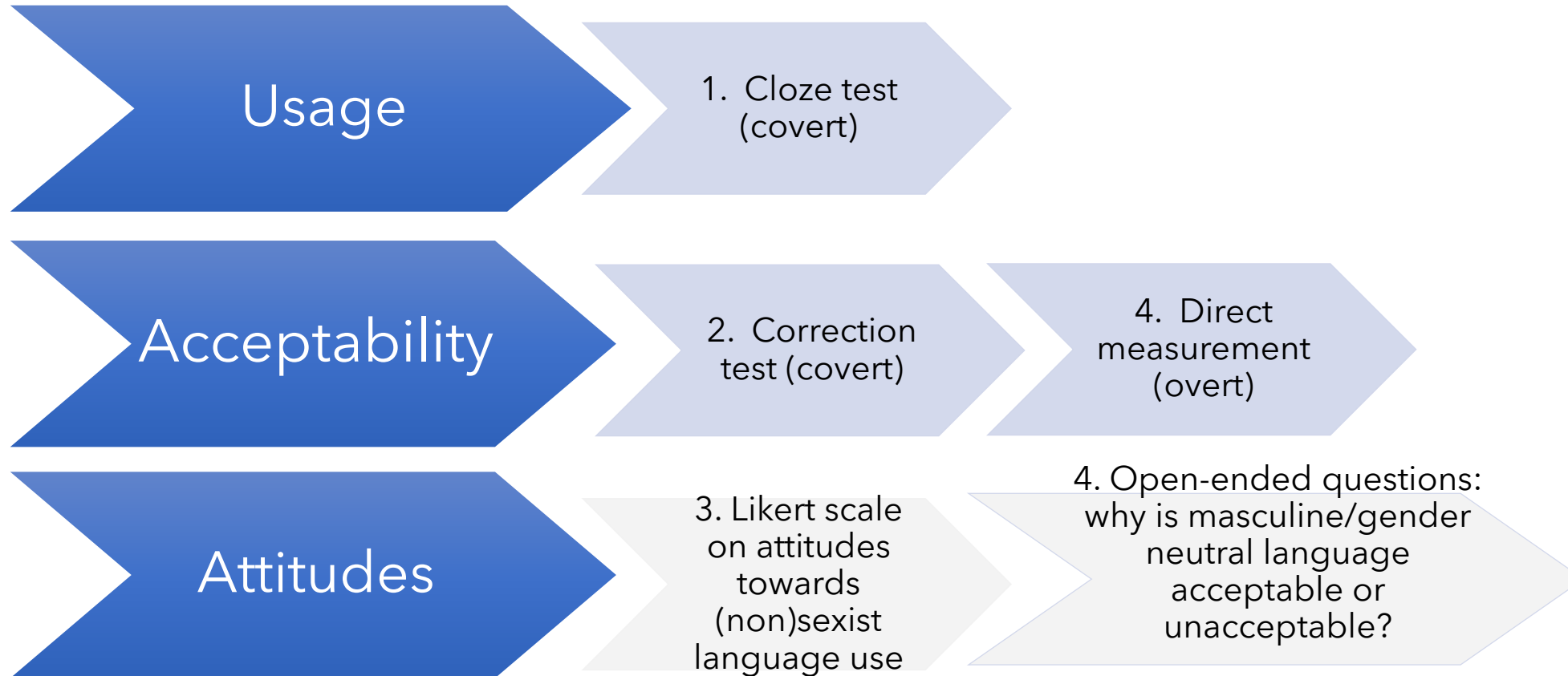
# Present study

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- Focus on occupational nouns with *-mies* (man) and *-emäntä* (hostess) (see also Stout & Dasgupta, 2011; Vervecken et al., 2013)
- Online survey (spring 2022)
- Several pilots before data collection
- Advertised on discussion forums and social media (e.g., Finnish Reddits, Facebook groups, Suomi24)
- Gender exclusive language focus covert for participants (with ethical approval)

# Survey design

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# Participants

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- 1146 participants
- All native Finnish speakers (about 6% bilinguals)
- 54% cis men, 31% cis women, 7% nonbinary, 3% trans men, 1% trans women (rest: other/missing)
- Age range 15 to 90 years-old, but 86% are under 40-years-old
- 70% have college/university-level education

# Preliminary results



# Usage

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- Cloze test, only 4 test variables, 12 fillers
- Test variables:
  - stereotypically male: *palomies/pelastaja* (fireman/firefighter) & *huoltomies/huoltovastaava* (janitor)
  - stereotypically female: *lentoemäntä/matkustamotyöntekijä* (air hostess/ flight attendant)
  - stereotypically 'neutral' masculine: *esimies/esihenkilö* (supervisor[+masc])

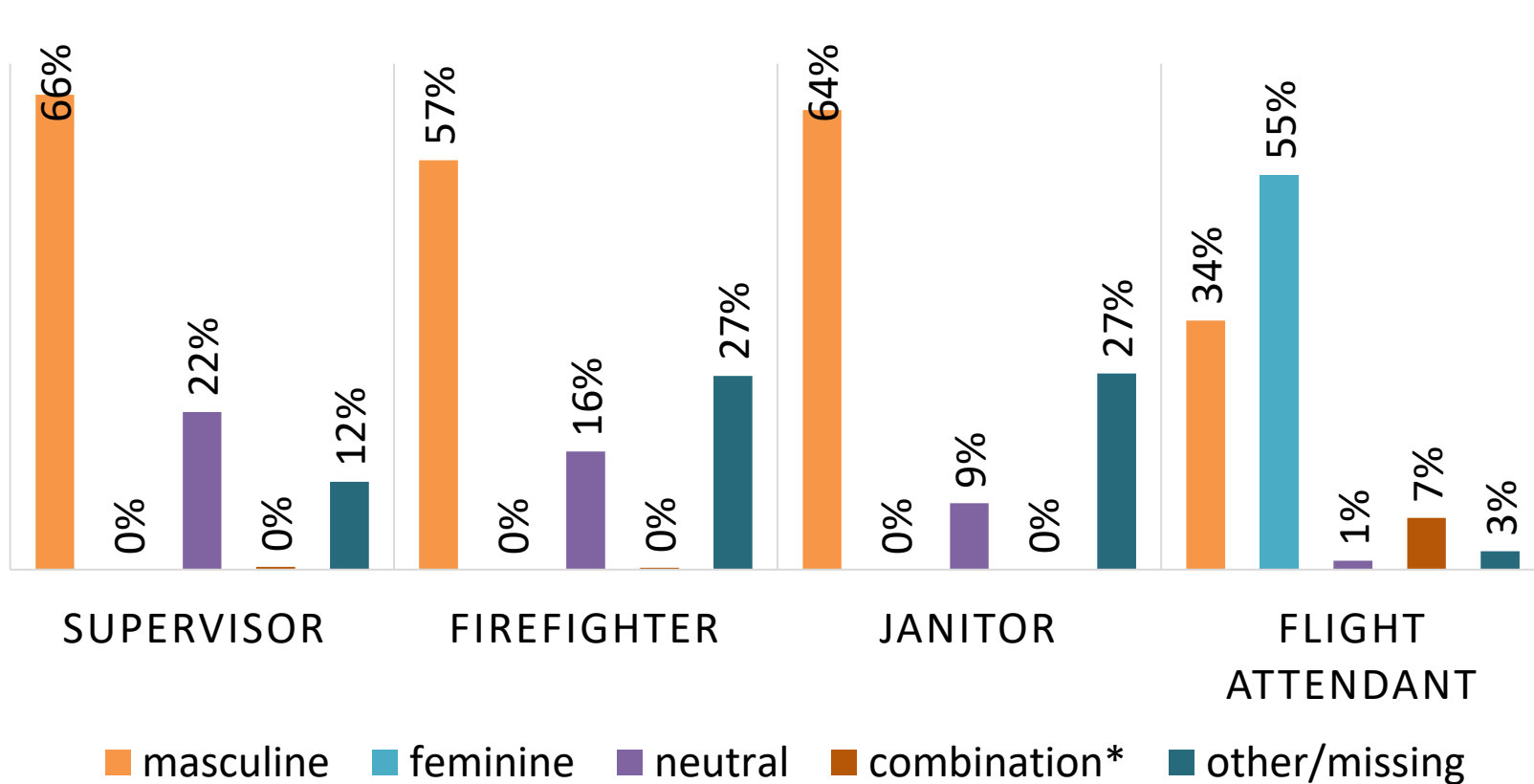
Paloasemilla työpäivät alkavat aina sillä, että jokainen \_\_\_\_\_ tarkastaa omat varusteensa työvuoronsa aluksi.  
At the fire station, each \_\_\_\_\_ checks their equipment at the beginning of each shift.

\_\_\_\_\_ on lentokoneen matkustamohenkilökuntaan kuuluva henkilö, joka huolehtii matkustajien mukavuudesta lennon aikana, esimerkiksi virvokkeita tarjoilemalla.

\_\_\_\_\_ is a member of the cabin crew, whose job it is to make sure that the passengers are comfortable during the flight, for example by serving beverages.



# Usage: Preliminary results



Traditional: lentoemäntä [+fem]

New male title: Stuertti [+masc]

Gender neutral neologism:  
matkustamotyöntekijä

N=1146

\*combination: mostly  
masculine+neutral, only a handful of  
other combinations

# Acceptability (covert)

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- Task: participants mark words in example sentences as 'unacceptable'
- 5 test examples, 5 fillers
- Fillers: Anglicisms/Swedicisms, included even in test sentences

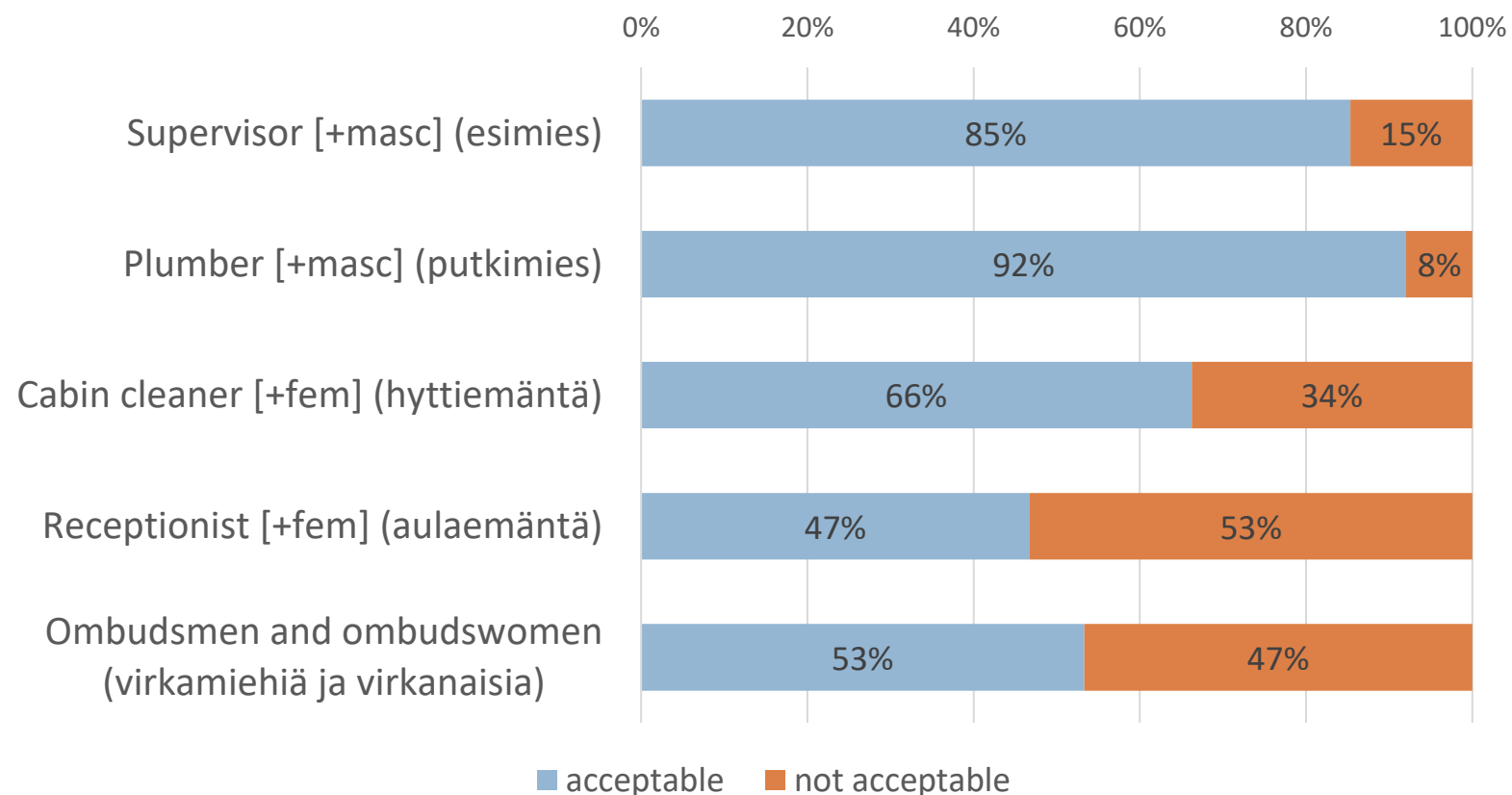
Tutkimuksessa selvisi, että monet **esimiehet** ovat itse lähellä *burn outia*, eivätkä siksi kykene huomioimaan alaistensa työtaakkaa.

The study showed that many **supervisors [+masc]** are themselves *burned out* and thus unable to be considerate of their employee's work load.

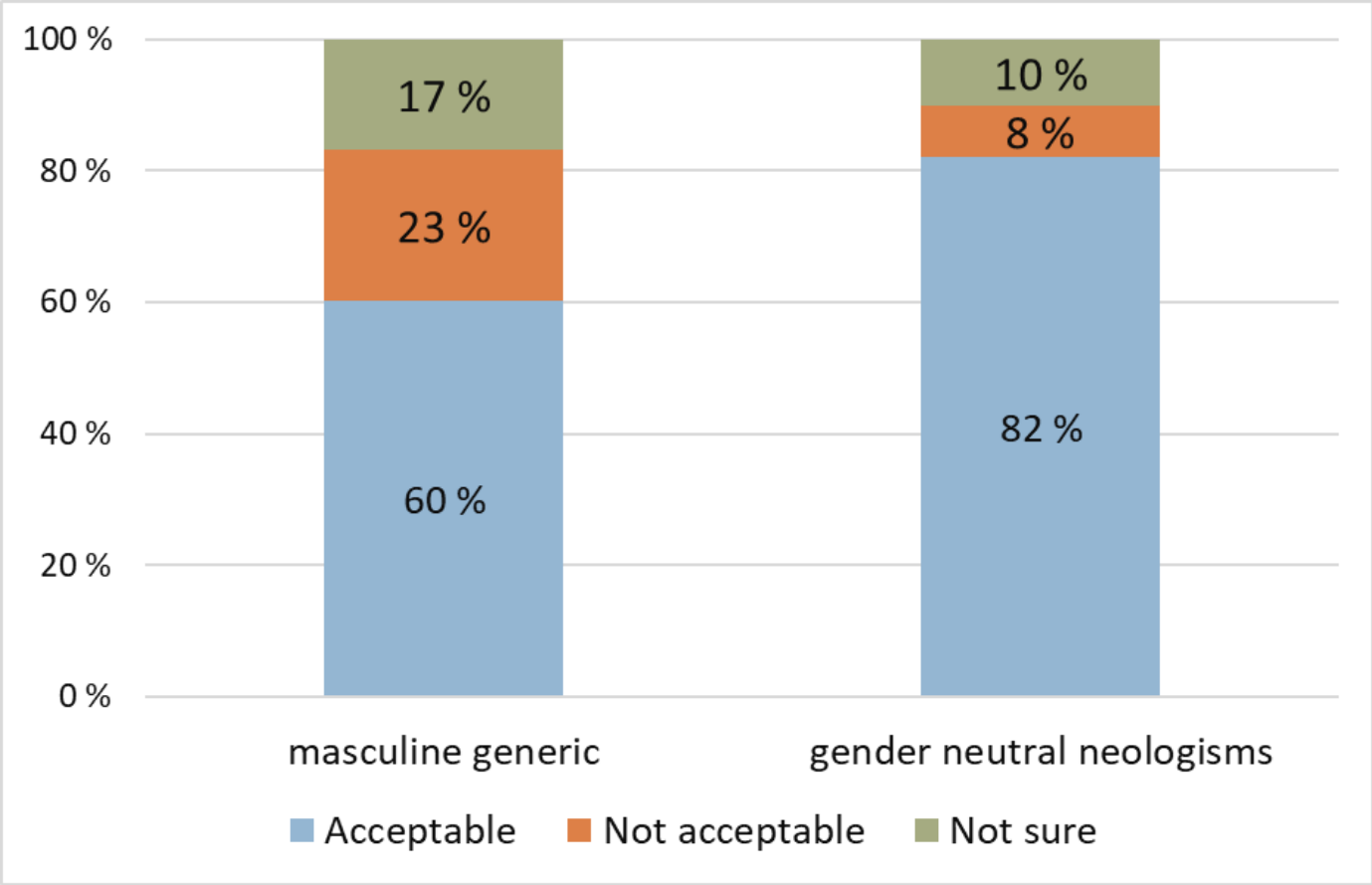
**Putkimies** tarvitsee jokoavainta, taiteilija *kreisiyttä*.

A **plumber [+masc]** needs a wrench, an artist some *craziness*.

# Acceptability (covert): Preliminary results



# Acceptability (overt): Preliminary results



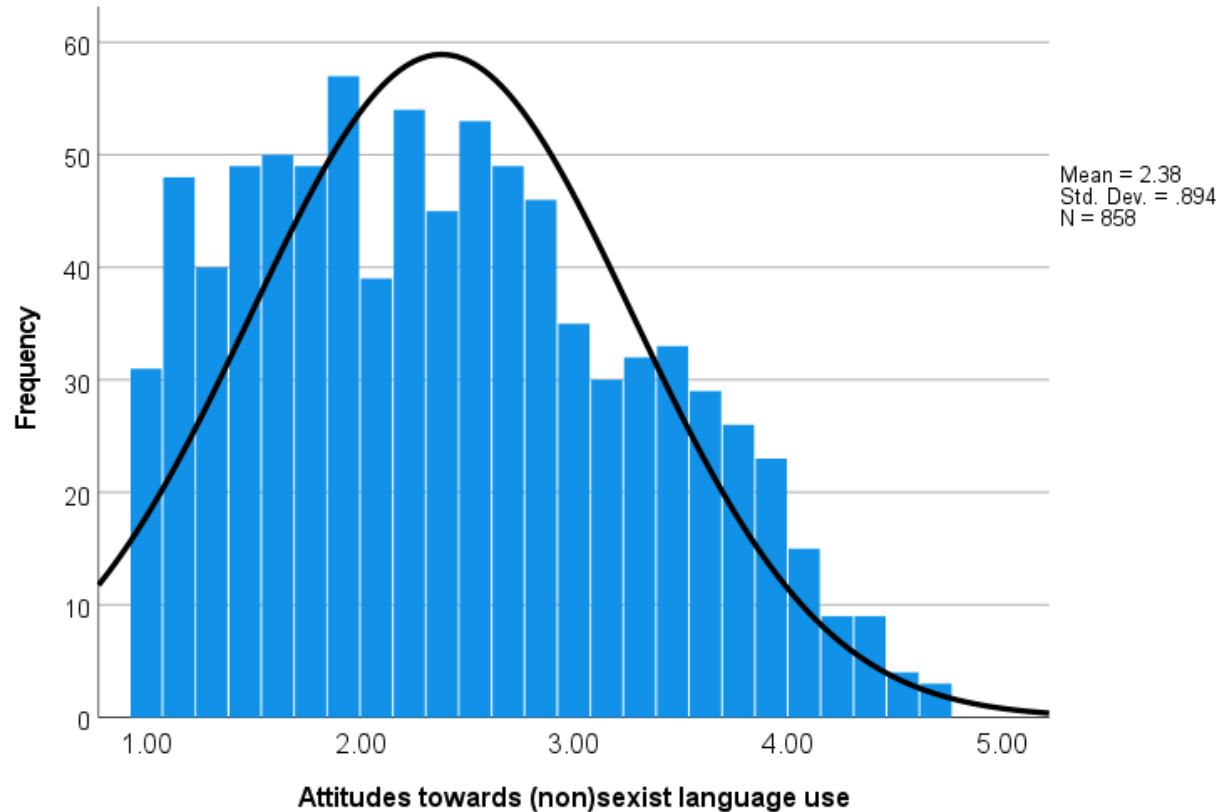
# Attitudes towards (non)sexist language use

- Scale based on Parks & Robertson (2000) and Hekanaho (2020), translated and modified
- Validated with several pilots
- Factor analysis & Cronbach's  $\alpha$  (0.93)
- Includes 13 items, and three factors:
  1. Interpretation of generic masculines
  2. Importance of nonsexist language use (incl. 2 items on cissexist language, e.g. "It is equal enough to talk about men and women")
  3. Dismissal of sexist language
- Sexist language: Language use that excludes, diminishes or discriminates against a group of people based on gender

1. Women who think that being called a "chairman" is sexist are misinterpreting the word "chairman."	Jos nainen kokee "lakimieheksi" kutsutuksi tulemisen seksistiseksi, tulkitsee hän sanan merkityksen väärin.
3. Worrying about sexist language is a trivial activity.	On turhaa murehtia seksistisestä kielenkäytöstä.
4. If the original meaning of the word "he" was "person," we should continue to use "he" to refer to both males and females today.	Koska "esimiehellä" on aina voinut viitata myös naisiin, voidaan sanaa käyttää jatkossakin naisiin viitatessa.
6. The English language will never be changed because it is too deeply ingrained in the culture.	Suomen kieltä ei voi muuttaa, koska sen juuret ovat syvällä kulttuurissa.
7. The elimination of sexist language is an important goal.	Seksistisen kieliaineksen karsiminen kielestä on tärkeää.
[There is no harm in calling an adult female a girl]	Aikuisten naisten tytöttely on harmitonta
[Talking only about "men and women" does not discriminate against nonbinary people]	Vain "naisista ja miehistä" puhuminen ei syrji muunsukupuolisia.

# Attitudes towards (non)sexist language use:

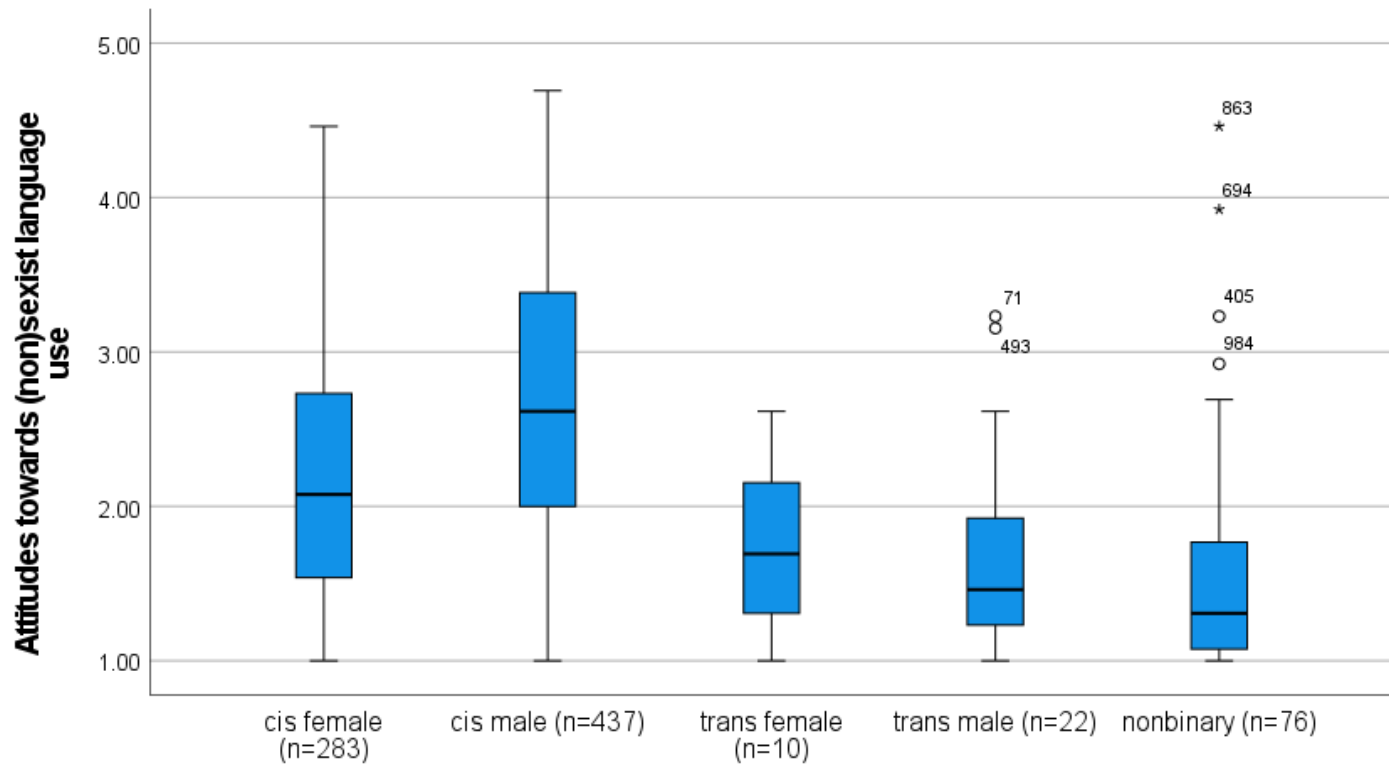
## Preliminary results



### Orientation:

- lower scores indicate negative attitudes towards sexist language use and positive attitudes towards nonsexist language use
- high scores indicate dismissive attitudes (there's no sexist language, sexist language not a problem, no need for nonsexist language)

# Attitudes towards (non)sexist language use: Preliminary results



Orientation:

- lower scores indicate negative attitudes towards sexist language use
- high scores indicate dismissive attitudes

# Attitudes towards exclusive language: preliminary observations

## Defending gender-exclusive titles

- *-man* is traditional/established, and language is difficult to change/there are no good alternatives
- *-man* is gender neutral
  - *They are traditional terms that refer to both men and women*
- Trivial issue
  - *They are just words*
  - *Fairly harmless*
  - *I have used such language for 70 years and there has been no problem*

## Criticising gender-exclusive titles

- *-man* is not gender neutral, out-dated, and exclusive
  - *Not all foremen are men and man is no longer neutral*
  - *Man is not a harmless word [...] it implies that the stereotypical human is male, and everyone else is an anomaly, needing to defend their human value and right to exist*

How do you feel about – man compounds? Do you find them acceptable? (As epicenes) Please elaborate.





# Attitudes towards inclusive language: Preliminary observations

## Defending gender-inclusive titles

- Gender-fair titles support equality & language change is natural
  - *Gender neutral words include people of all genders, including those outside the binary*
  - *It's not difficult to use new words. Why should we continue using words that support male dominance?*

## Criticising gender-inclusive titles

- -henkilö (-person) often target
- silly/stupid/awkward/clumsy or unnecessary
  - *They are acceptable but sound stupid*
  - *It is acceptable but I don't know if they are needed*

How do you feel about gender neutral neologisms? Do you find them acceptable? Please elaborate.



# What next?

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- Quantitative analysis: regression models for tasks on usage, acceptability and attitudes (Likert)
  - Exploring which background variables explain variation (gender, age, education, province)
- Qualitative data: corpus-assisted thematic analysis
  - About 50 000 words (ca. 150 pages)
  - Explore attitudes in more depth
- Comparison to previous studies, meta-analysis perhaps (e.g., Parks & Robertson, 1998; Vergoossen et al., 2020) → are language attitudes universal?

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