

Undoing gender in a gender-marking language: Gender-inclusive forms in plural role nouns in German

Álvaro Cortés Rodríguez^{1,2}, Larissa Specht³

¹University of Kassel; ²University of Tübingen; ³Independent Researcher
a.cortes-rodriguez@uni-kassel.de; larissa.specht@posteo.net

German lacks linguistic means to refer to non-binary individuals. For plural role nouns, the gender-inclusive neo-affix *-*innen* has been suggested as an alternative to the generic masculine. However, this form has faced criticism for being unlicensed (Eisenberg 2018) and creating a female bias in interpretation (Körner et al. 2022). Yet, studies have shown a disadvantage for female referents following a generic masculine antecedent (e.g., Gygax et al. 2008; Misersky, Majid & Snijders 2019). We argue that there is an asymmetry between the gender-inclusive and generic masculine plurals (see Bobaljik & Zocca 2011), where the neutral plural is less marked and can more readily function as an antecedent for both feminine and masculine anaphora.

We conducted a judgment study to assess the neutrality and overall acceptability of generic masculine and gender-inclusive plurals in German. Our study followed a 2x2 design with MARKEDNESS (generic masculine vs. gender-inclusive) and ANAPHORA (gender-marked one-anaphora) as factors and consisted of 24 items (1)). The results (n=28) showed no main effects for ANAPHORA and MARKEDNESS, but a significant interaction. A pairwise comparison revealed a significant difference for anaphora in the generic masculine conditions, where feminine anaphora were rated significantly less acceptable than masculine anaphora following a generic masculine antecedent.

This study shows that the gender-inclusive affix *-*innen* is a viable alternative to the generic masculine form in German and that this gender-inclusive form includes both female and male referents without a bias and could potentially be used to represent all genders.

- (1) a. **Die Nachbarn** haben sich am Mittwoch getroffen, [genericMasc]
the.PL neighbors have REFL on.the Wednesday met
b. **Die Nachbar*innen** haben sich am Mittwoch getroffen, [genderIncl]
the.PL neighbors have REFL on.the Wednesday met
... weil {einer/ eine} von ihnen ein Jubiläum hatte.
because one.MASC one.FEM of them a anniversary had

References

- Bobaljik, Jonathan David & Cynthia Levart Zocca. 2011. Gender markedness: The anatomy of a counter-example. *Morphology* 21(2). 141–166. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11525-010-9156-3>.
- Eisenberg, Peter. 2020. Das Deutsche ist eine geschlechtergerechte Sprache – ohne Zwang und ohne Manipulation. bpb.de.
- Gygax, Pascal, Ute Gabriel, Oriane Sarasin, Jane Oakhill & Alan Garnham. 2008. Generically intended, but specifically interpreted: When beauticians, musicians, and mechanics are all men. *Language and Cognitive Processes* 23(3). 464–485. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01690960701702035>.
- Körner, Anita, Bleen Abraham, Ralf Rummer & Fritz Strack. 2022. Gender Representations Elicited by the Gender Star Form. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 41(5). 553–571. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X221080181>.
- Misersky, Julia, Asifa Majid & Tineke M. Snijders. 2019. Grammatical Gender in German Influences How Role-Nouns Are Interpreted: Evidence from ERPs. *Discourse Processes* 56(8). 643–654. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163853X.2018.1541382>.