Gendered Variation in Spoken German: Has Prescriptivism Affected the Vernacular?

James M. Stratton,

Abstract

The present study uses variationist sociolinguistic methods to examine the factors that influence the use of gender-inclusive language in unrehearsed spoken German. The use of gender-fair, gender-neutral, and generic masculine constructions are analyzed in unrehearsed spoken German across two speech communities: a speech community in Germany (Westoverledingen, Northwest Germany) and a speech community in Switzerland (Basel, Northwest Switzerland). Results indicate that both language-internal (morphological composition) and language-external factors (sex, age, geography, education) are found to influence the use of gender-inclusive language, but social factors outweigh the effect of geography. While gender-neutral language is found in everyday spoken German, the generic masculine is still used over 70 percent of the time, making it the default variant. This study provides insight into the factors which currently influence the use of gendered language constructions, while adding to the developing scholarship on German variationist sociolinguistics.

Keywords: gendered variation, gender-inclusive language, variationist sociolinguistics, German

Introduction

Like many languages of the world, German has a grammatical gender system. Both animate (e.g., *der Lehrer* 'teacher') and inanimate nouns (e.g., *das Licht* 'light') belong to one of three grammatical genders: masculine, feminine, or neuter. However, when referring to a mixed-sex group (e.g., a group of both male and female referents), speakers often make use of the generic masculine, that is, the linguistic convention whereby the morphological masculine form of a word is used to refer to speakers of all sexes and gender identities, as in (1). Whether used in the singular (1a) or plural (1b), the meaning can be ambiguous: the referents can be exclusively male, they can be male and female, or they can be non-binary, trans, or intersex.[1] While female, non-binary, trans, and intersex referents are theoretically included in the generic masculine reading, they lack overt morphological marking.

(1)   (a) *der Student ist im Klassenzimmer*

           'the student.MASC is in the classroom'

        (b) *Studenten sind im Klassenzimmer*

           'students.MASC are in the classroom'

Views on the use of the generic masculine fall into two schools of thought: the semantic view and the arbitrary view. According to the semantic view, there is a close relationship between grammatical gender and biological gender. The semantic view is in line with traditional scholarship on linguistic relativism, where language and cognition are thought to be closely

---

[1] While non-binary, trans, and intersex speakers are theoretically included as referents in the generic masculine, the extent to which images of these speakers are evoked through the generic masculine remains to be empirically investigated.

intertwined (Whorf, 1956). According to this association, use of the generic masculine is thought to be androcentric (Trömel-Plötz, 1978; Guentherodt et al., 1980; Grabrucker, 1980). Pusch (1999:10) illustrated this gender bias with the example: *99 Staatsbürgerinnen und ein Staatsbürger sind auf Deutsch 100 Staatsbürger* '99 female citizens and one male citizen, in German, are 100 male citizens'. Even though there are 99 female citizens, the presence of one male citizen "makes the whole NP morphologically masculine" (Stratton, 2018:5). Indeed, studies have found that a lack of overt morphological visibility can have societal implications, specifically, psycholinguistic studies have shown that the generic masculine evokes more mental images of male referents (Braun et al., 2005; Sczesny et al., 2016). A job advertisement that reads *Journalist gesucht* 'journalist sought' is referentially ambiguous because it is unclear whether female, non-binary, trans, intersex, or agender speakers are included as permissible candidates. For this reason, other than cisgender men, people may be less likely to apply for a position than if gender-inclusive language were used (Horvath & Sczesny, 2015). Although gender-inclusive language is thought to impede readability and is less aesthetically-pleasing, Marcus and Heise (2019) found that comprehensibility ratings were not affected by the use or absence of gendered language. Gender-inclusive language, in its more antiquated use, refers to language that includes both male and female referents (e.g. *Lehrer und Lehrerinnen* 'male and female teachers') in contrast to gender-exclusive language which does not (e.g. *Lehrer* 'teachers.MASC'). However, more recently, efforts toward creating and using gender-inclusive language have moved beyond the male-female binary and seek to represent speakers of all gender identities, including agender speakers.

On the other hand, the arbitrary view maintains that there is no association between grammatical gender and biological gender (Kalverkämper, 1979). Therefore, "grammatical gender is regarded as an exclusively formal feature; gender assignment of nouns is believed to be arbitrary" (Braun

et al., 2005). In other words, the labels masculine, feminine, and neuter, are categorical terms which would be perhaps more adequately described as "Group I" "Group II" "Group III." In fact, many languages of the world use such labels. For instance, Swahili has eight noun classes and Zulu has 16 noun classes. In this view, grammatical categories do not necessarily reflect inherent biological or societal categories just like different noun classes have no bearing on or association with sex and gender in the real world. As mentioned in Stratton (2018:6), "one of the main reasons why many forms in Modern Standard German are "androcentric" is due to the morphological history of the language itself and not so much the intention of individual speakers." Plurals that are so-called "androcentric" are often, from a historical perspective, an artifact of the grammatical and morphological structure (Ibid). Even if speakers conflate grammatical gender with biological gender, the large majority of speakers who use the generic masculine are not intentionally trying to be sexist (Stahlberg et al., 2007). Instead, speakers are using the linguistic resources at their disposal, which they have obtained through the natural process of language acquisition.

The arbitrariness of gender assignment is observable throughout the history of Germanic languages. For instance, in Modern Standard German, the derivational suffix *-heit* is grammatically feminine (e.g. *die Krankheit* 'illness'), but the cognate counterparts in respective Germanic languages are not (e.g. Norwegian *en skjønnhet* 'beauty.MASC' versus German *die Schönheit* 'beauty.FEM'). Even though German *-heit* and Scandinavian *-het/hed* are reflexes of Proto Germanic **haidus*, their grammatical gender has changed throughout history (e.g. masculine in Norwegian, feminine in German, and non-gender-specific in English). Variation in grammatical gender can even be found in early Germanic languages (e.g. Old Saxon *magaðhed* 'virginity.FEM', Old English *mægðhad* 'virginity.MASC', see also Old English *se cildhad* 'childhood.MASC' and German *die Kindheit* 'childhood.FEM', Old Saxon *lefhed* 'illness/sickness.FEM' and German

Krankheit 'illness/sickness.FEM') and the same level of variability can be found with other derivational suffixes (e.g. German *-tion*: *die Information*, *die Conversation*, Norwegian *-sjon*: *en informasjon*, *en konversasjon*). Gender assignment with clothing in Modern Standard German also illustrates this arbitrariness (e.g. *der Rock* 'skirt.MASC,' *der Bikini* 'bikini.MASC').

Regardless of whether one adopts the semantic view or the arbitrary view, several innovations have entered the German language over the last five decades due to feminist and LGBTQIA+ advocacy work. Typographically, efforts toward achieving more overt linguistic gender equality have resulted in the development of several linguistic conventions, such as the *Paarform* 'pair form' (e.g. *Lehrerinnen und Lehrer* 'female teachers and male teachers'), the *Binnen-I* 'the capital I' (e.g. *LehrerInnen*), the *Schrägstrich* 'forward slash' (*Lehrer/innen*), the *Bindestrich* 'hyphen' (e.g. *Lehrer-innen*), *Klammern* 'parentheses' (e.g. *Lehrer(innen)*), the *Gendergap* 'the gender gap' (e.g. *Lehrer_innen*), the *Doppelpunkt* 'hyphen' (e.g., *Lehrer:innen*), the *Gendersternchen* 'genderstar' (e.g. *Lehrer*innen*), and more recently, the *X-Form* 'x-form' (e.g. *Lehrx*).[2] Of these innovations, only the latter four include non-binary, trans, intersex, and agender speakers. Although the majority of the typographic conventions have become frequent in formal written registers, i.e., bureaucratic and educational settings, because most of them are not easily pronounceable (e.g. *Lehrer/innen*), it is reasonable to hypothesize that they have had little effect on everyday spoken German (Castillo Días, 2003). However, it should be noted that some attempts have been made to oralize the written conventions, such as the insertion of a glottal stop between the gendered morpheme boundary (Bußmann & Hellinger, 2003; Stratton, 2018:11). While the original goal in the 1970s into the late 20th century was to increase the visibility of women, in

---

[2] The use of the genderstar (e.g., *Politiker*innen*) includes non-binary speakers (e.g., transgender or intersex), but Pusch (2019) criticizes its use because they are not morphologically visible whereas men (e.g., *-er*) and women (e.g., *-innen*) are.

recent years the discourse has moved beyond the male-female binary to include speakers of all sexes and gender identities, with innovations such as non-binary pronouns (e.g. *xier* 'they') and the adoption of English singular *they*.[3] *Hen* is another example of a gender-neutral pronoun in German, which can be inflected for case (*hen* 'accusative, *hem* 'dative', and *hens* 'genitive').[4] Nevertheless, despite increasing efforts to create more gender-inclusive language, proposals have been and still are met with some resistance.[5]

Because most of the earlier proposals created a problematic binary distinction (e.g. *Lehrerinnen und Lehrer* 'female teachers and male teachers'), additional strategies have been employed, such as the substantivization of verbs, as in *die Studierenden* 'the ones who study' (derived from *studieren* 'to study'), the substantivization of participles, as in *die Angestellten* 'the employees' (derived from *anstellen* 'to employ'), and the substantivization of adjectives, as in *die Jugendlichen* 'the adolescents' (from *Jugend* 'youth' + derivational suffix *-lich* + plural morpheme *-en*). Other strategies include the use of relative clauses in lieu of noun phrases (e.g., *die Personen*, *die studieren* 'the people who study') and the use of gender-neutral lexemes, such as *Person* 'person,' *Fachkraft* 'specialist,' *Arbeitskraft* 'workforce,' *Feuerwehrleute* 'fire brigade people,' and *die Redaktion* 'editorial staff' as opposed to generic masculine counterparts (Guentherodt et al., 1980; Diewald & Steinhauer, 2019). In recent years, some gender-neutral nouns have been neologized through linguistic resources such as clipping (e.g., see *Studis* as an alternative to *Studenten* 'students').

---

[3] For more information, see https://geschlechtsneutralesdeutsch.com/das-nona-system/

[4] An example of its use is: *Hans is eine nicht-binäre Person – hen ist* […] 'Hans identifies as non-binary – they are […]'.

[5] See, for instance, signatures collected from over 90,000 people against the *Gender Unfug*, https://vds-ev.de/aktionen/aufrufe/schluss-mit-gender-unfug/

Despite the ubiquity of gender-inclusive language constructions in formal spoken and written discourse, little is known about their frequency in informal spoken German. To date, to the best of my knowledge, only one study has attempted to tap into this empirical question, albeit with a number of shortcomings (Stratton, 2018). Since these prescriptive forms were imposed on the German language, it is reasonable to hypothesize that in unrehearsed speech, namely vernacular speech (Labov, 1972:188), they are used less frequently. In a previous study, 30 native speakers of Modern Standard German were asked to describe eight referents in both singular and plural conditions. When describing a mixed-sex group (specifically, a stereotypical group of cisgender male and female referents), responses fell into three categories: the generic masculine (e.g. *die Lehrer* 'the teachers'), a gender-neutral variant (e.g. *die Lehrkraft* 'teaching force'), and a gender-fair variant (e.g. *Lehrerinnen und Lehrer* 'female teachers and male teachers').[6] Except for the female singular condition, the generic masculine was the preferred variant, suggesting that the use of more gender-inclusive language is register-specific and is therefore rarely used in unrehearsed informal spoken German. The present study builds on this previous study by adding new data and using a different type of framework, namely variationist sociolinguistic methods. Specifically, two research questions are addressed. First, the analysis. Two research questions are addressed. First, what is the distribution of variants in the two speech communities? In other words, of the three macro variants (i.e., gender-neutral, gender-fair, and generic masculine), which is used most frequently, and do choices differ across the two speech communities? Second, is the use of gender-

---

[6] Gender-neutral and gender-fair language are both types of gender-inclusive language. The difference is that gender-neutral language circumvents mentioning the gender (e.g., *Lehrpersonen* 'teaching people') whereas gender-fair language includes both male and female referents in the noun phrase (e.g., *Lehrer und Lehrerinnen* 'male and female teachers'). However, gender-fair constructions are not always "gender-fair" in the sense that they do not necessarily include non-binary, intersex, or agender speakers.

inclusive or gender-exclusive language sensitive to linguistic and social constraints? For instance, is there a correlation between the use of a particular variant and social factors? Does the morphological composition of a word interact with the realization of a given variant?

Methodology

Speakers

The corpus for the present study consists of 48 speakers of Federal and Swiss Standard German (23 from Germany, 25 from Switzerland). Speakers from Germany came from an East Frisian speech community (Westoverledingen, Lower Saxony) and speakers from Switzerland lived in the Basel speech community. Stratified sampling was carried out where possible to keep the age and sex of the speakers proportionate. The distribution by sex and age is reported in Tables 1 and 2. For recruiting speakers younger than 18 years of age, a school from both speech communities with a comparable academic standing was selected, and stratified random sampling was carried out within the two schools. To recruit speakers over the age of 18, flyers and word of mouth were used.[7]

---

[7] This study was first carried out in Germany in 2016 and was then extended to include a Swiss sample in 2017. Speakers ages 11-12 took part in the initial study in Westoverledingen (Germany), but due to recruitment problems and the structure of Swiss schools, speakers 11-12 were not included in the Swiss sample. Following the suggestion of a reviewer, to ensure comparability of age groups, data from 11–12-year-old speakers from Germany are not included in the present analysis. However, for information on 11–12-year-old speakers, please see Stratton (2018).

Table 1. German speaker profiles ($n = 26$)

Age	Male	Female	Total
13-15	3	3	6
16-18	3	3	6
19-39	3	3	6
40+	3	2	5
TOTAL	15	14	23

Table 2. Swiss speaker profiles ($n = 25$)

Age	Male	Female	Total
13-15	3	3	6
16-18	3	3	6
19-39	3	3	6
40+	3	4	7
TOTAL	12	13	25

Design and procedure

The approximate duration of the study was 10-15 minutes. Speakers were asked to describe images containing referents in four conditions: the male-only condition (e.g. *Lehrer*), the female-only condition (e.g. *Lehrerin*), the mixed-sex group condition (e.g. *Lehrerinnen und Lehrer*), and the female-only group condition (e.g. *Lehrerinnen*). However, in line with variationist sociolinguistics practices, the variable context was circumscribed to a comparable uniform context, namely the

description of mixed-sex plural referents.[8] For the speakers from Germany, images were deliberately chosen to elicit a response using six target (real) lexemes (*Schüler* 'pupil,' *Lehrer* 'teacher,' *Tourist* 'tourist,' *Spion* 'spy,' *Bundeskanzler* 'chancellor,' *Präsident* 'president') as well as two pseudowords (*Selfiemacher* 'a selfie-taker' and *Iphoner* 'an iPhone user'). Pseudowords were included in the design to examine potential differences between established and less established words with respect to their use as gender-inclusive or gender-exclusive realizations. The pseudowords were introduced using the following verbal prompt in (2).

(2)   *Viele Wörter kommen jeden Tag in die deutsche Sprache hinein. Jetzt erfinden wir zwei neue Wörter in diesem Zimmer: ein Selfiemacher und ein Iphoner (also Iphone, mit 'r' am Ende). Ein Selfiemacher ist jemand, der ein Selfie macht und ein Iphoner ist jemand, der ein Iphone benutzt. Kannst du bitte das Wort Selfiemacher/Iphoner benutzen, um die folgenden Bilder zu beschreiben.*

'Lots of words enter the German language every day. Now we're going to coin two new words, right here in this room: a selfie-taker and an *iPhoner* (that's Iphone, with an 'r' on the end). A selfie-taker is someone who takes a selfie and an *iPhoner* is someone who uses an iPhone. Can you please use the words *Selfiemacher* or *Iphoner* to describe the following images.'

Because of elicitation challenges which became apparent after the initial part of the study in Germany, the target words were modified by the time this study was carried out in Switzerland (replacement words: *Schüler* 'pupil,' *Lehrer* 'teacher,' *Politiker* 'politician,' *Polizist* 'police officer,' *Soldat* 'soldier'). *Tourist* was removed because the images of tourists in the German

---

[8] For information on the other three conditions, see Stratton (2018).

sample rarely elicited a response using this target word. Therefore, for the Swiss population, *Tourist* was replaced with *Polizist* 'police officer' because it is easier to elicit, but this word still ends in the morphological ending *–ist*. *Präsident* was replaced with *Soldat* because it was challenging to elicit *Präsident* in plural conditions. Images of German *Bundeskanzler* were also replaced with images that were culturally relevant to the Swiss sample (thus, *Politiker* 'politician' as opposed to *Bundeskanzler* 'German federal chancellor'). The images, which were used to elicit the two original pseudowords, were used in the Swiss sample, but two additional words were also included, namely *Dabtänzer* 'someone who is dabbing/the dab dance move' and *Schubbrettfahrer* 'someone who rides a hoverboard'; prompts for the latter two appear in (3) and (4). Additional pseudowords were included for the Swiss study because a speaker in the German sample claimed to have already heard *Selfiemacher* previously. The differences in prompts must therefore be taken into account when making comparisons between the two speech communities.

(3)   *Jetzt erfinden wir (noch) ein Wort und zwar Dabtänzer. Ein Dabtänzer ist jemand, der so*

        (they were shown the hand movement which is used in the dance move) *tanzt.*

        'Now we're going to coin a new word: *Dabtänzer*. A *Dabtänzer* is someone who does this with their hands when they dance.'

(4)   *Jetzt erfinden wir (noch) ein Wort und zwar Schubbrettfahrer. Ein Schubbrettfahrer beschreibt jemanden, der mit einem Schubbrett fährt. Viellecht haben Sie schon mal einen gesehen* (they were shown a picture). *Im Englischen heißt es ein Hoverboard.*

        'Now we are going to coin yet another word, namely *Schubbrettfahrer*. A *Schubbrettfahrer* describes someone who travels by *Schubbrett*. Maybe you've seen one of these (shown an image). In English, it's called a 'hoverboard'

The image of two women taking a selfie in Figure 1 was used to elicit *Selfiemacherinnen* (female-only referents). Figure 2 shows the image of a *Dabtänzer*; that was used to elicit *Dabtänzer* (male-only referent). Speakers were presented with visual stimuli (i.e. the appropriate images) one at a time, as in Figures 1 and 2, and were asked to describe what they saw. Efforts were taken to hinder speakers from discerning the study's purpose, although it was anticipated that speakers would discover its goal toward the end of the tasks. For example, the order of the images was counterbalanced for each speaker in order to minimize the chances of this occurring. After describing all images, the speakers were asked whether they had some inkling of the goal of the study. None of the 59 speakers were able to identify its purpose.

Figure 1. Image R – *Zwei Selfiemacherinnen*[9]

---

[9]As in the previous study, the images could not be included in the present publication due to copyright regulations. However, two of the images (Image R and Image T) do belong to the author and thus are reported in Figure 1 and 2. For more information on the images used, see Stratton (2018:36-38).

Figure 2. Image T – *Ein Dabtänzer*

Data coding

The linguistic variable is defined as two or more ways of saying the same thing (Labov, 1972: 188). These different ways are referred to as variants. To describe a group of mixed-sex referents, speakers of German have at least three variants at their disposal: a generic masculine variant (e.g. *die Schüler* 'the pupils'), a gender-neutral variant (e.g. *die Kinder* 'children'), and a gender-fair variant (e.g. *Schülerinnen und Schüler* 'female teachers and male teachers'). For the data analysis, each variant was coded with a number (generic = 1, gender-neutral = 2, gender-fair = 3). Coding the data in this way prepared the dataset for the distributional analysis. However, for the multivariate analysis, gender-fair and gender-neutral responses were concatenated into one level so that comparisons could be made between gender-inclusive language variants (i.e. the use of gender-neutral & gender-fair forms) and gender-exclusive language variants (i.e. the use of generic masculine forms).

In order to examine the factors conditioning the choice to use gender-inclusive versus gender-exclusive language when describing mixed-sex referents, a binary mixed effects logistic regression analysis was run in *Rbrul* (Johnson, 2009). The response, that is, the dependent variable, had two levels: [gender-inclusive language, gender-exclusive language]. One internal factor (morphological composition) and four external factors were run as independent variables (sex, age, education, geography). MORPHOLOGICAL COMPOSITION had three levels [*-er*, *-ist*, OTHER], SEX had two [male, female], AGE had four [13-15, 16-18, 19-39, 40+], GEOGRAPHY had two [Germany, Switzerland], and EDUCATION had two [higher education, no higher education].[10] Each speakers was also run as a random intercept in the model to account for idiosyncratic intra-speaker variability.

Results

Distributional analysis

Table 3 reports the distribution of variants used to describe mixed-sex referents in the East Frisian and Basel speech communities, excluding pseudowords. The generic masculine was used over 70% of the time, followed by use of gender-neutral variants (used over 20% of the time), with gender-fair forms (e.g. *Lehrerinnen und Lehrer* 'female and male teachers') ranking the least frequent. Overall, the generic masculine was used more frequently by speakers from East Frisia than speakers from Basel, and speakers from Basel used gender-neutral and gender-fair forms more frequently than those from East Frisia. Table 4 relays the distribution of the three variants used to describe mixed-sex referents using the four pseudowords. The distribution indicates that

---

[10] For MORPHOLOGICAL COMPOSITION, the endings *-at*, *-ent* and *-ion* were included in the *OTHER* category given that *-at* only appeared in the Swiss sample and *-ion* and *-ent* only appeared in the German sample.

the generic masculine was almost always used when referring to or describing a mixed-sex group of *Selfiemacher*, *iPhoner*, *Dabtänzer*, and *Schubbrettfahrer*.

Table 3. Distribution of Variants for Describing Mixed-Sex Referents (real words)

	Generic Masc		Gender-Fair		Gender-Neutral	
	N	*%*	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*
East Frisia	125/160	78	1/160	.6	34/160	21.4
Basel	84/125	71	5/125	4	31/125	25

Table 4. Distribution of Variants for Describing Mixed-Sex Referents (pseudowords)

	Generic Masc		Gender-Fair		Gender-Neutral	
	N	*%*	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*
East Frisia	60/60	100	0/60	0	0/60	0
Basel	94/96	98	0/96	0	2/96	2

Only one instance of the *Paarform* was found in the German sample, see (5). When the speaker was informed after the study that they were the only person to use the *Paarform*, the speaker suggested that their occupation may have played a role in its use, as their occupation may have made them more sensitive to the importance of linguistic social equality, see (6). In contrast, there were five instances of the *Paarform* used by the Swiss sample, see (7). However, in both speech

communities, whenever the *Paarform* was used, it was produced by speakers whose occupation may have required them to use legalese and gender-inclusive language, i.e. professions such as government and postal clerks, teachers, and lawyers. As for the use of gender-neutral forms (excluding pseudowords), these were used approximately 20% of the time when describing a mixed-sex group. For instance, to describe a group of both male and female teachers, some speakers used the gender-neutral forms *Lehrkräfte*, *Kollegium* and *Lehrpersonen* 'teaching force/faculty'. In the Swiss sample, mixed-sex groups of police officers and soldiers were frequently described using gender-neutral constructions (e.g. *Polizeibeamten* 'police officials,' *Polizei* 'police,' *Polizeistreife* 'police patrol'). For the soldiers, speakers often used the gender-neutral word *Militär* 'military' as opposed to the lexical item *Soldaten* (e.g. *sie sind im Militär*). On the one hand, using *Militär* over *Soldaten* may point to some attempt to acknowledge that soldiers do not have to be cisgender men. However, on the other hand, *Soldatinnen* 'female soldiers' was never used to describe a group of female-only soldiers. Speakers circumvented this word form by using the word *Militär* 'military' (e.g. *die Frauen sind im Militär* 'the women are in the military'). Since *Soldatinnen* would have been a grammatical and felicitous response, avoidance of this term may be indicative of the social expectations with respect to the roles women are stereotypically thought to perform. On the other hand, avoiding a gendered term may also suggest that speakers are acknowledging the diverse gender identities that soldiers can have.

(5)   *Ich sehe Schülerinnen und Schüler*

         'I see female pupils and male pupils'

(6)   *Die Tatsache, dass ich Sozialarbeiter bin, spielt vielleicht eine Rolle, weil*

         ich der Wörter bewusst bin, die ich benutze - vielleicht bewusster als andere Leute

'The fact that I'm a social worker perhaps plays some role because I'm more

aware of the words that I use – perhaps more aware than others'

(7)   (a)   *Ich sehe ein Klassenzimmer mit jungen Schülern und Schülerinnen*

'I see a classroom with young male pupils and female pupils'

[Basel, male, 52, insurance adjuster]

(b)   *Das ist eine Versammlung von Lehrerinnen und Lehrern*

'That is a gathering of female and male teachers'

[Bern, male, 83, retired, former postal worker]

(c)   *Das sind Lehrer und Lehrerinnen*

'Those are male teachers and female teachers'

[Basel, female, 53, secretary]

(d)   *Das sind Lehrerinnen und Lehrer*

'Those are female teachers and male teachers'

[Basel, 52, male, teacher]

(e)   *Ich sehe Lehrer und Lehrerinnen. Also die Lehrkräfte*

'I see male teachers and female teachers. So the faculty'

[Basel, 52, male, insurance adjuster]

The frequency of the generic masculine is plotted in apparent time in Figure 3. The apparent time

distribution shows that younger speakers relied more frequently on the generic masculine than

older speakers. In contrast, older speakers used more gender-inclusive language than younger speakers. As for gender differences, five of the six speakers who used gender-fair forms were male, but there were few differences in the use of gender-neutral language.

Figure 3. The Use of the Generic Masculine in Apparent Time
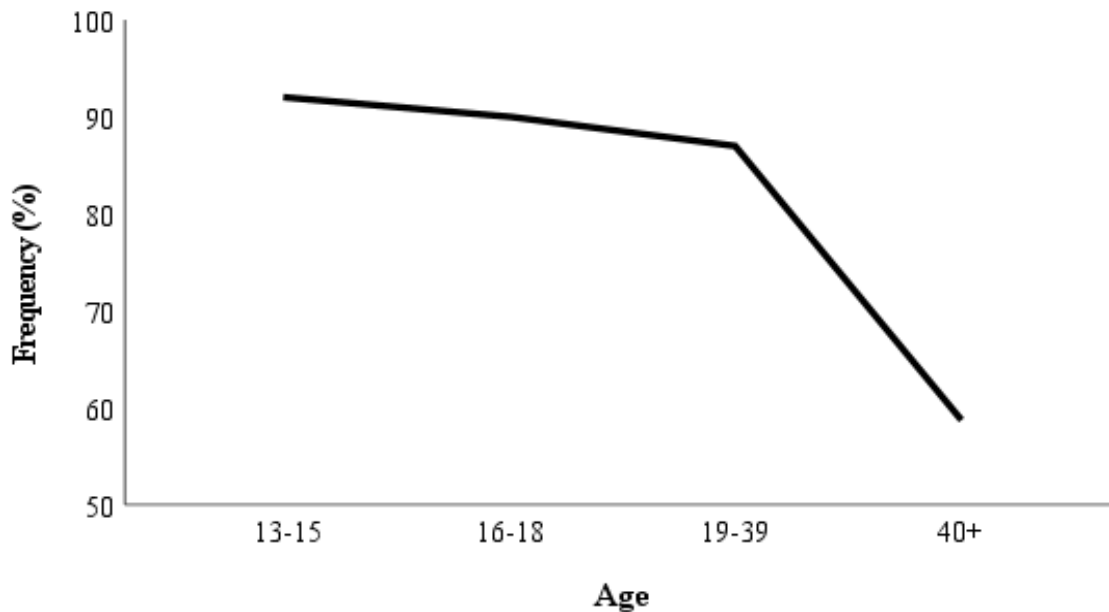
Multivariate Analysis

A logistic regression analysis was run in *Rbrul* (Johnson, 2009) to examine the factors influencing the use of gender-inclusive and gender-exclusive language when describing a mixed-sex group. The generic masculine (or gender-exclusive language) was run as the application value and five factors (independent variables) were included in the model: internal (MORPHOLOGICAL COMPOSITION) and external (AGE, SEX, EDUCATION, GEOGRAPHY), with SPEAKER run as a random intercept. The output of the model, reported in Table 5, contains factor weights for each factor group, which range from 0-1; a numeric value closer to 1 indicates the favoring of the application value (in this case, the use of the generic masculine).

Table 5. Logistic Regression of Factors Conditioning Use of Generic Masculine to Describe

Mixed-Sex Referents

	N	%	FW
Input	.71		
Total N	455		
MORPHOLOGY (5.77e-06)			
-er	317	89.9	.71
-ist	54	68.5	.37
OTHER	84	72.6	.42
Range			34
SEX (0.211)			
Male	229	80.8	.43
Female	226	87.6	.56
Range			13
AGE (8.13e-11)			
13-15	158	92.4	.67
16-18	102	90.2	.60
19-39	101	89.1	.57
40+	94	58.5	.19
Range			48
EDUCATION (7.4e-07)			
Higher education	92	58.7	.26
No higher education	363	90.6	.73
Range			47
GEOGRAPHY (0.66)			
Germany	232	84.9	.51
Switzerland	223	83.4	.48
Range			3

The model found three of the five factors to be statistically significant. First, MORPHOLOGICAL COMPOSITION was significant, indicating that lexical items ending in *-er* were more likely to appear in the generic masculine than lexical items containing other morphological suffixes. Second, AGE was significant, confirming that younger speakers used the generic masculine more frequently than older speakers as the distributional evidence suggested. Third, EDUCATION was significant, indicating that speakers with a higher level of education were less likely to use the generic masculine than speakers with jobs without higher education. In contrast, speakers with higher education used more gender-inclusive language than speakers without higher education. The range for the factor groups indicates that AGE (48) and EDUCATION (47) had the strongest effect on the use of gender-inclusive and gender-exclusive language.

Discussion

Although the use of gender-inclusive language has become common practice in formal written and formal spoken German, little was known about its frequency in unrehearsed spoken German. To address this gap in research, the present study used variationist methods to examine its frequency relative to gender-exclusive language and to examine the factors that may influence its use or absence of use in unmonitored language. Through an elicited production task, the present study found that, despite its increase in frequency in formal registers, the generic masculine was still by far the number one variant in informal spoken German. In both the East Frisian and Basel speech communities, the generic masculine was used over 70% of the time to describe a group of mixed-sex referents. Moreover, younger speakers used the generic masculine more frequently than older speakers, potentially suggesting, that the generic masculine is becoming more dominant in

vernacular spoken German.[11] However, that said, gender-neutral constructions were used over 20% of the time, suggesting some linguistic awareness of the need to overtly include speakers of diverse gender identities. In contrast, gender-fair constructions, such as the so-called *Paarform*, were used rarely. On the one hand, the low frequency of binary gendered constructions could suggest that this type of language has not become a common part of the vernacular. However, on the other hand, avoiding binary gendered constructions in favor of gender-neutral constructions may suggest that speakers are aware of the issues concerning the use of binary forms in the context of non-binary, agender, or intersex speakers. Therefore, when speakers do choose to use gender-inclusive language, they opt for forms that are more gender-inclusive (i.e. gender-neutral language) and when do not choose to use gender-inclusive language, they use the generic masculine; with binary gendered forms rarely being utilized.

In terms of absolute frequency, the generic masculine was used less frequently in Basel than in East Frisia, and gender-inclusive language occurred more frequently in Basel than East Frisia. By itself, this finding could suggest that urbanity is having some effect on the use of gendered language. As one might expect, speakers in urban environments may have a higher level of awareness of the issues concerning the use of the generic masculine than speakers in (semi-)rural environments; urban planes have larger populations which could mean more diversity and thus the need for linguistic representation of a broader range of groups. Moreover, urban environments house more formal professions which, in turn, means speakers may be more accustomed to formal language. However, contrary to these hypotheses, geography was not identified as a statistically

---

[11] Higher frequency among younger generations can indicate language change in progress, whereas higher frequency in older cohorts typically indicates receding use. For more information, see Labov (1963, 1966) Bailey et al. (1991) and Bailey (2003).

significant factor. Instead, linguistic (morphological composition) and social factors (age and education) were identified as significantly influencing gendered language.

In terms of age, older speakers used gender-inclusive language at a significantly higher frequency than younger speakers. One possible explanation may be that the movement toward using prescriptive gender-inclusive linguistic forms has been ongoing for quite some time, meaning that older speakers are likely to have had longer exposure to this type of language than younger speakers, specifically insofar as the inclusion of cisgender women is concerned.[12] Only six of the 51 speakers used the *Paarform* to describe a group of seemingly male and female referents. The fact that all six speakers were over the age of 50 suggests that age plays an important role in its use. However, it is likely that age is interfering with education, as speakers with higher education (i.e. those in the 19-39 age category or above) were found to use more gender-inclusive language than speakers without higher education (i.e. below the age of 19). Since speakers in the 13-15 and 16-18 age groups were still in secondary education, age is flagged as a factor even though it is likely education that is conditioning the use of gender-inclusive language.

---

[12] It should be noted, however, that attempts have been made to employ gender-neutral strategies throughout the history of Germanic and despite recent innovations, such attempts are not a recent phenomenon. For instance, Gothic had *frauja* 'lord' which surfaces as *frō* 'lord' and *frouwa* 'woman' in Old High German, where only the latter lives on today in Modern Standard German (other than in retentions such as *Fronleichnam* 'lord's body'). The fact *Frau* 'women' has become more common than the masculine counterpart points toward the change in social roles over time. Similarly, Old English had *man* which had both a generic masculine and non-generic masculine interpretation, but *wer* 'man' and *wif* 'woman' were available for disambiguating the two (note that *wer* only remains in retentions such as *werewolf* but *wif* remains as *wife* having undergone semantic narrowing). However, due to the Anglo-Saxon patriarchal society, *wer* 'man' was still used in arguably sexist ways in Old English (e.g., *werleas* 'unmarried' - literally 'man-less'). The derivational suffix *–in* was also used in Old High German for overtly marking female referents (e.g., *friuntin* 'female friend'). To provide one more example, unlike Old English, Old Norse plural articles were declined for gender (*þeir* 'masculine plural', *þær* 'feminine plural', *þau* 'neuter plural'), and the neuter plural was often used when referring to a group of both male and female referents.

With respect to education, and in part, occupation, all speakers who used gender-fair language had higher education and worked in some official formal capacity, which arguably required them to use or be exposed to gender-inclusive language regularly, as evidenced in the example in (6). Although speakers who had less formal and arguably blue-collar professions (e.g. baker, construction worker) were found using some gender-neutral forms (e.g. *Leute* 'people'), more specialized choices (such as *Lehrkräfte* 'teaching force,' *Polizeibeamte* 'police official') were reserved to the speech of speakers who were highly educated and held white-collar jobs. This finding is in line with Sczesny, Moser and Wood (2015) who found that the use of gender-inclusive language is "a product of both deliberate and habitual factors." In other words, speakers who are regularly exposed to gender-fair and gender-neutral language are more likely to internalize these forms and use them in vernacular speech. That is not to say that speakers without higher education and formal professions never use gender-inclusive language but there is a correlation between the use of gender-inclusive language and a speaker's education level, and thus, in turn, often occupation. Because of the relationship between education and prescriptivism, it seems only natural that a speaker's education would play a role in the use of prescriptively imposed gender-inclusive language. Moreover, given that administrative and higher educational settings are loci in which gender-inclusive guidelines have been promoted, it is also not surprising that speakers being educated or working in these settings use this type of language most frequently.

Although register was not included as a factor in the quantitative analysis, a comparison of the present results with the reported frequency of gender-inclusive language in formal registers suggests that register is a factor conditioning the use of gendered language in Federal and Swiss Standard German. After all, when writing, speakers have the time to monitor or edit their speech consciously so that it conforms with gender-inclusive guidelines, a statement which is also true for

rehearsed spoken language. In contrast, in unrehearsed speech, speakers do not have this luxury. Despite the significant progress toward using gender-inclusive language in written registers, the present study indicates that gender-inclusive language is rarely used when little to no monitoring occurs. Studies on gender-inclusive forms in formal written language have found that the generic masculine is still used more frequently than gender-fair and gender-neutral forms (Sczesny et al., 2015)

Despite the evidence of the use of some gender-neutral language, the overall low frequency of gender-inclusive language may be indicative of the limited effects of prescriptivism on naturally occurring speech, as prescriptivism is known to have a larger effect on written language than vernacular language (e.g., Auer, 2006; Crystal, 2006; Poplack & Dion, 2009; Anderwald, 2016). Many examples of the failings of prescriptivism on naturally occurring speech are observable, such as the prescribed attempt to remove double negation in English, which still nevertheless appears in the vernacular (Wolfram & Schilling, 2015:47-48). The prescribed pronunciation of the <ch> digraph in Federal Standard German is another example, which has many regional realizations which do not conform to the standard (Herrgen, 1986). Even if prescriptive rules are monitored in written language, in unmonitored speech the true vernacular surfaces, and efforts to suppress such language can often result in hypercorrection. For instance, speakers of German who pronounce <ch> as a postalveolar fricative following front vowels as opposed to the palatal fricative make a conscious effort to replace their vernacular pronunciation with the prescribed (palatal) pronunciation. However, this prescribed self-monitoring often results in hypercorrection (e.g. *komisch* 'strange' [komɪʃ] becomes [komɪç]).

Finally, to examine whether novel words are more propitious to the process of *gendern* 'gendering,' four pseudowords were included in the study. The study found that speakers were less

likely to realize the pseudowords in a gender-inclusive format than real words. No speakers attempted to use the pseudowords in a gender-fair format (e.g. *sie sind Selfiemacher und Selfiemacherinnen* 'they are male and female selfie-takers'), which provides additional support for the fact that gender-inclusive language has made little imprint on unmonitored speech production. While speakers have the linguistic capacity and resources to use novel words in a gender-inclusive way, speakers almost always realized them using the generic masculine. Given that older speakers used more gender-inclusive language than younger speakers, the results from the pseudowords words bring into question whether duration of exposure to the stimuli (i.e. the words) is a contributing factor. Since speakers had just encountered the words, despite having the linguistic resources to use them in gender-inclusive ways, such a process likely takes monitoring and therefore necessitates time.

Conclusion

Over the last five decades, several innovations have entered the German language as a result of feminist and LGBTQIA+ advocacy work. However, despite frequently occurring in formal discourse, little was known about the extent to which gender-inclusive language has been adopted in German vernacular speech. The present study tapped into this question using variationist sociolinguistic methods. Results indicated that with the exception of some gender-neutral constructions, overall, gender-inclusive language was rarely used in unrehearsed spoken German. Instead, the generic masculine was the norm. Although speculative, I see three possible explanations for the limited integration of gender-inclusive language in unmonitored speech.

First, the absence of gender-inclusive constructions may not reflect disinterest toward gender equality social movements, but rather a general product of ideologically-driven prescriptive

attempts to change a language that speakers have already naturally acquired. Although prescriptivism can have an impact on written and prepared speech due to the time available for monitoring, when speakers have little to no time to monitor their speech, the vernacular is uttered, which, in the case of the present study, results in the output of the generic masculine.

However, on the other hand, there are two more optimistic explanations for the absence or low frequency of gender-inclusive language in vernacular speech. On the one hand, it is possible that progress toward gender equality has been so dramatic in different domains of society that the need for gender-inclusive language outside of legal and formal settings has been unnecessary. On the other hand, forms such as the *Paarform* (e.g., *Lehrerinnen und Lehrer* 'female and male teachers') may occur at a low frequency in everyday vernacular spoken German because speakers feel it is inadequate. Instead of using binary gendered forms, they turn to gender-neutral constructions to cater for a larger diverse group of identities. Nevertheless, even though gender-neutral language can be found in everyday spoken German, the generic masculine still prevails, suggesting that prescriptivism has had less effort on the vernacular than on writing.

Even though gender-inclusive language was rarely found in German vernacular speech, on the few occasions it was used its use was influenced by linguistic and social factors. First, words with particular morphological endings were found to be more amenable to being realized as a gender-inclusive form than others. Second, older speakers were found to be more likely to use gender-inclusive language than younger speakers, and finally, speakers with higher education were found to be more likely to use gender-inclusive language than speakers without higher education. Although, in terms of absolute frequency, the speakers from Switzerland used gender-inclusive language more frequently than the speakers from Germany, this difference was not statistically significant. This latter finding is important in the larger context of German sociolinguistics since

traditionally, geography has been referenced as one of the most central explanatory factors influencing German variation and change (see Stratton, 2022). However, at least in terms of the two speech communities sampled in the present study, geography played less of a role, whereas social factors such as education had a larger effect. Therefore, a broader contribution of the present study is the finding that factors other than geography condition and constrain German variation and change, a finding which is in line with recent variationist work on German (Stratton, 2020, 2022; Beaman, 2021; Bülow et al., 2021). The higher weighting of the effects of social factors over geography on the use of the generic masculine is not entirely surprising given the social nature tied to the importance of linguistic gender equality movements. As I have mentioned elsewhere (Stratton, 2022), the goal of these studies is not to downplay or de-emphasize the role of geography as a conditioning factor since geography has inevitably played a crucial role in German dialectology. However, instead, the point is that a common finding which emerges from these studies is that other factors, both linguistic and social, also operate on various aspects of German variation and change. Awareness of this finding could pave the way for future research on the social correlates of German variation and change.

Bibliography

Acke, Hanna. "Sprachwandel durch feministische Sprachkritik." *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik*, 49, no. 2, (2019): 303-320.

Anderwald Lieselotte. *Language Between Description and Prescription. Verbs and Verb Categories in Nineteenth-Century Grammars of English*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016.

Auer, Anita. "University of Leiden Precept and Practice: The Influence of Prescriptivism on the English Subjunctive." In *Syntax, style and grammatical norms: English from 1500-2000*, edited by D. Kastovsky, 33-54. Berne: Peter Lang, 2006.

Bailey, Guy, Tom Wikle, Jan Tillery, and Lori Sand. "The apparent time construct." *Language Variation and Change*, 3, no. 3, (1991): 241-264.

———. "Real and apparent time." In *The Handbook of Language Variation and Change*, edited by Jack K. Chambers, Peter Trudgill and Natalie Schilling-Estes, 312-332. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003.

Beaman, Karen. "Swabian relatives: Variation in the use of the wo-relativiser." In *Advancing Socio-grammatical Variation and Change*, edited by Karen V. Beaman, Isabelle Buchstaller, Sue Fox, James A. Walker, 134-164. New York: Routledge, 2021.

Braun Friederike, Anja Gottburgsen, Sabine Sczesny, and Dagmar Stahlberg. "Können

Geophysiker Frauen sein? Generische Personenbezeichnungen im Deutschen." *Zeitschrift für germanistische Linguistik*, 26, no. 3, (1998): 265-283.

Braun Friederike, Sabine Sczesny, and Dagmar Stahlberg. "Cognitive effects of masculine generics in German: An overview of empirical findings." *Communications*, 30, (2005): 1–21.

Busse, Ulrich and Anne Schroeder. "Problem areas of English grammar between usage, norm, and variation." In *Grammar between Norm and Variation*, edited Alexandra Lenz and Albrecht Plewnia, 87-102. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2010.

Bußmann Hadumod, and Marlis Hellinger. "Engendering Female Visibility in German." In *Gender across Languages*, edited by Marlis Hellinger and Hadumod Bußmann, 141-174. Amsterdam and Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins, 2003.

Bülow, Lars, Andrin Büchler, Nicolai Timon Rawyler, Christa Schneider, and David Britain. "Linguistic, social, and individual factors constraining variation in spoken Swiss Standard German." In *Intra-individual Variation in Language*, edited by Alexander Werth, Lars Bülow, Simon E. Pfenninger and Markus Schiegg, 127–173. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2021.

Castillo, Días Estrella. "Der Genus/Sexus-Konflikt und das generische Maskulinum in der deutschen Gegenwartssprache." PhD diss., University of Passau, 2003). Accessed May 1, 2017. https://opus4.kobv.de/opus4-uni-passau/files/33/ECastillo.pdf

Crystal David. *The Fight for English: How language pundits ate, shot, and left*. Oxford

University Press, 2006.

Diewald Gabriele, and Anja Steinhauer. *Gendern – Ganz einfach!* Berlin: Duden, 2019.

Friedrich Marcus, and Elke Heise. "Does the use of gender-fair language influence the

comprehensibility of texts? An experiment using an authentic contract manipulating

single role nouns and pronouns." *Swiss Journal of Psychology*, 78, no. 1-2, (2019): 51–

60.

Grabrucker, Marianne. *Vater Staat hat keine Muttersprache*. Frankfurt: Fischer, 1993.

Guentherodt Ingrid, Marlis Hellinger, Luise Pusch F., and Senta Trömel-Plötz. "Richtlinien

zur Vermeidung sexistischen Sprachgebrauchs." *Linguistische Berichte*, 69, (1980): 15–

21.

Herrgen, Joachim. *Koronalisierung und Hyperkorrektion. Das palatale Allophon des /CH/-

Phonems und seine Variation im Westmitteldeutschen*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1986.

Horvath Lisa, and Sabine Sczesny. "Reducing the lack of fit for women with leadership

positions? Effects of the wording in job advertisements." *European Journal of Work and

Organizational Psychology* 25, no. 2, (2015): 316-328.

Johnson, Daniel, E. "Getting off the GoldVarb standard: Introducing Rbrul for mixed-effects

variable rule analysis." *Language and linguistics compass* 3, no. 1 (2009): 359-383.

Kalverkämper, Hartwig. (1979). "Die Frauen und die Sprache." *Linguistische Berichte* 62,

(1979): 55-71.

Labov, William. "The social motivation of a sound change." *Word*, 19, no. 3, (1963): 273-309.

———. *Sociolinguistic patterns*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972.

———. *The social stratification of English in New York City*. Washington. D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1966.

Lamb, Victoria and Filippo Nereo. "Equality amongst citizens? A study of how the German basic law and the German version of the Swiss constitution exhibit and avoid sexist language." *German Life and Letters* 65, no. 1, (2012): 109–126.

Moser, Franziska, and Bettina Hannover. (2014). "How gender fair are German schoolbooks in the twenty-first century? An analysis of language and illustrations in schoolbooks for mathematics and German." *European Journal of Psychology of Education* 29, no. 3 (2014): 387–407.

Poplack Shana, and Nathalie Dion. "Prescription vs. praxis. The evolution of future temporal reference in French." *Language*, 58, no. 3, (2009): 557-587.

Pusch, Luise F. "Der Mensch ist ein Gewohnheitstier, doch weiter kommt man ohne ihr." *Linguistische Berichte* 63, (1979): 84–101.

———. *Die Frau ist nicht der Rede wert*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999.

———. "Das Gender-Sternchen ist nicht die Lösung." https://www.jetzt.de/hauptsache-gendern/gendern-linguistin-luise-f-pusch-ueber-das-gendersternchen-und-geschlechtergerechte-sprache

Sczesny Sabine, Magdalena Formanowicz, and Franziska Moser. "Can Gender-Fair Language Reduce Gender Stereotyping and Discrimination?" *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7, (2016): 1-11.

Sczesny, Sabine, Franziska Moser, and Wendy Wood. "Beyond sexist beliefs: How do people decide to use gender-inclusive language?" *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 41, no. 7, (2015): 943-954.

Stahlberg Dagmar, Friederike Braun, Lisa Irmen, and Sabine Sczesny. "Representation of the sexes in language." In *Social Communication*, edited by Klaus Fiedler, 163-187 (New York: Psychology Press, 2007).

Stefanowitsch, Anatol. "Gendergap und Gendersternchen in der gesprochenen Sprache." Written in 2018. http://www.sprachlog.de/2018/06/09/gendergap-und-gendersternchen-in-der-gesprochenen-sprache/

Stratton, James. "The Use of the Generic Masculine, the Derivational Morpheme -in. and Gender-Fair Innovations in Unrehearsed Spoken Dialogue in Modern Standard German." *Interdisciplinary Journal for Germanic Linguistics and Semiotic Analysis* 23, no. 1, (2018): 1-52.

———. Adjective Intensifiers in German. *Journal of Germanic Linguistics*, 32, no. 2,

(2020): 183-215.

———. Tapping into German Adjective Variability: A Variationist Sociolinguistic

Approach. *Journal of Germanic Linguistics*, 34, no. 1 (2022): 63-101.

Stratton, James, and Karen Beaman. *Expanding Variationist Sociolinguistic Research in

Varieties of German*. London: Routledge, 2024.

Trömel-Plötz Senta. *Linguistik und Frauensprache*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch

Verlag, 1978.

Whorf, Benjamin. *Language, thought, and reality: Selected writings.* J. B. Carroll (Ed.),

Cambridge, Mass: Technology Press of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1956.

Wolfram, Walt, and Natalie Schilling Estes. *American English: Dialects and Variation*. (3rd

ed.). Oxford: Blackwell, 2015.