

The Spontaneous Use of the Generic Masculine: An Empirical Comparison between German and Swiss Speakers of Modern Standard German

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Grammatical Gender

- **Inanimate Nouns:** In Modern Standard German inanimate nouns are assigned to one of three grammatical genders (masculine, feminine or neuter)
- **Animate Nouns:** Due to the traditional bipartite gender view of the world, most speakers of Modern Standard German refer to animate nouns using only the masculine or feminine.

Few exceptions such as *das Mädchen* ‘girl’ (grammatically neuter) BUT speakers tend to use biological sex rather than grammatical gender (Oelkers 1996)

Derivation

- An animate noun denoting a **female referent** can be formed from an animate noun denoting a **male referent** by affixing the derivational suffix *–in* (or *–innen* in plural)

Lehrer > *Lehrerin*, *Lehrerinnen* ‘teacher, female teacher, female teachers’

Polizist > *Polizistin*, *Polizistinnen* ‘policeman, policewoman, policewomen’

Table 1. *Gender Paradigm for Strong Nouns*

	Singular	Plural
Masculine	Lehrer	Lehrer + ∅
Feminine	Lehrer + <i>in</i>	Lehrer + <i>innen</i>

Referring to Mixed Sex Groups

- Speakers make use of the **Generic Masculine** (*henceforth, GM*):
 - “*linguistic convention whereby the morphological masculine form of a word is used to refer to both sexes*” (Stratton, forthcoming)
- The GM can appear in both the plural (1), or the singular as in (2)

(1) die Schüler sind im Klassenzimmer
DEF-PL students-MASC-PL PRS-PL in. ART.SING
classroom.SG

‘the students are in the classroom’

(2) der Schüler soll fleißig sein
DEF-M-SG student-MASC-SG PRS-SG ADJ INF

‘the student should be hard-working’

GM: Two Opposing Views

1. Semantic View:

The use of the generic masculine may morphologically exclude female referents (Trömel-Plötz 1978; Guentherodt, et al. 1980; Schoenthal 1989; Hellinger 1985; Grabrucker 1993)

2. Arbitrary View:

“grammatical gender is regarded as an exclusively formal feature; gender assignment of nouns is believed to be arbitrary” (Braun et al. 2005: 4)

Empirical Reality?

Whether this is true **cognitively** has been a topic of much discourse and empirical analysis over the last 30 years

(Klein 1988; Hamilton 1988; Hamilton & Hunter & Stuart-Smith 1992; Scheele & Gauler 1993; Irmen & Köhncke 1996; Braun et al. 1998; Rothermund 1998; Heise 2000; Irmen & Kaczmarek 2000; Stahlberg & Sczesny 2001; Rothmund & Scheele 2004; Stahlberg et al. 2007; Irmen & Schumann; 2011; Formanowicz et al. 2013; Köser et al. 2015; Sczesny et al. 2016).

Semantic View: The Feminist View

- **“99 Staatsbürgerinnen und ein Staatsbürger sind (auf Deutsch) 100 Staatsbürger”** (Pusch 1999: 10)

‘99 female citizens and one male citizen, together, (in German) are 100 citizens’ (morphologically masculine)
- According to several feminists, using the generic masculine can be problematic (Pusch 1984: 59; Schoenthal 1989: 301)

Gender-fair Innovations

- The so-called *Paarform* ‘pair form’ (*Lehrerinnen und Lehrer* ‘female and male teachers’)

The *Paarform* is frequent in written language

(Bußmann & Hellinger, 2003; Castillo 2003; Moser & Hannover, 2014)

- Substantivized participial and adjectival forms (*die Studierenden* ‘the ones who study’)

- Typographic Change:

(1) *Schrägstrich* ‘forward slash’ *Lehrer/innen*

(2) *Bindestrich* ‘hyphen’ *Lehrer-innen*

(3) *Klammern* ‘parentheses’ *Lehrer(innen)*

(4) *Unterstrich* ‘underscore’ *Lehrer_innen*

(5) *Genderstar* ‘asterisk’ *Lehrer*innen*

(Braun et al. 2005)

Research Gap

- Research has shown that these ideologically imposed innovations are **frequent in written and formal language** (Bußmann & Hellinger 2003; Castillo 2003; Lamb & Nereo 2012; Moser & Hannover 2014)
- **Gap:** No empirical studies have investigated its **frequency** in **unrehearsed spoken speech** and whether **sociolinguistic** variables play a role

Present Study

- Investigates the **frequency** of the **GM** and **gender-fair innovations** in **extemporaneous spoken speech**
- **Sample:** German ($N=30$) and Swiss speakers ($N=24$) of Modern Standard German
- **Sampling Method:** Stratified Random Sampling (age and sex)

Table 2. *Participant Breakdown (German Sample)*

Age Range	Total Number of Male Participants	Total Number of Female Participants	Total Number of Participants
11-12	3	3	6
13-15	3	3	6
16-18	3	3	6
19-39	3	3	6
40+	3	3	6

Table 3. *Participant Breakdown (Swiss Sample)*

Age Range	Total Number of Male Participants	Total Number of Female Participants	Total Number of Participants
13-15	3	3	6
16-18	3	3	6
19-39	3	3	6
40+	3	3	6

Task

- **Elicitation Task**
- **26 images** were chosen to elicit a response using one of seven lexical items
- **5 lexical items** (real) and **2 lexical items** (nonce or coined words)

Table 5. The Tested Lexical Items

	Lexeme	Meaning
1	<i>Lehrer</i>	Teacher
2	<i>Schüler</i>	Pupil
3	<i>Politiker</i>	Politician
4	<i>Polizist</i>	Police Officer
5	<i>Soldat</i>	Soldier
6	<i>Selfiemacher</i> ^{*6}	'a selfie taker'
7	<i>Iphoner</i> ^{*6}	'an iPhoner'



Task

- Because the use of the GM or gender-fair innovations can change depending on the sex and number of referent(s), images tested the lexical items in **four conditions**

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Linguistic Form	Referent Type			
	Female Singular	Male Singular	Mixed Sex	Female-Only





Nonce Words

- “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”

‘Many words enter the German language every day. Now we’re going to invent/coin two new German words today in this room: a *Selfiemacher* and an *Iphoner* (i.e., an Iphone with an ‘r’ on the end). A *Selfiemacher* is someone who takes a selfie and an *Iphoner* is someone who uses an Iphone. Now, can you use these words to describe the following pictures’



Image – zwei Selbiamacherinnen ‘two selfie-takers-FEM-PL’

Possible Answers

- Four environments (for the referents)
- There are at least three possible expected answers:
 - (1) The **GM** (*zwei Selbismacher*)
 - (2) The use of the **derivational morpheme -in** (**gender-fair form**)
(*zwei Selbismacherinnen*)
 - (3) The **gender-neutral** form (*zwei Menschen*)

Table 4. Frequency of the Generic Masculine in Unrehearsed Spoken Dialogue

No.	Lexeme	Singular				Plural			
		Female Singular Referent		Male Singular Referent		Mixed Sex Referents		Only Female Referents	
		Raw	NF	Raw	NF	Raw	NF	Raw	NF
1.	<i>Lehrer</i>	0/24	0%	24/24	100%	18/24	75%	2/24	8.3%
2.	<i>Schüler</i>	0/24	0%	24/24	100%	15/24	62.5%	12/24	50%
3.	<i>Polizist</i>	0/24	0%	24/24	100%	20/24	83.3%	5/24	20.8%
4.	<i>Soldat</i>	0/24	0%	14/24	58.3%	8/24	33.3%	2/24	8.3%
5.	<i>Bundeskanzler</i>	1/24	4.2%	24/24	100%	24/24	100%	2/24	8.3%
6.	<i>Selfiemacher</i>	1/24	4.2%	24/24	100%	24/24	100%	6/24	25%
7.	<i>Iphoner</i>	1/24	4.2%	24/24	100%	24/24	100%	1/24	4.2%

Table 5. Frequency of the Derivational Morpheme *-in* in Unrehearsed Spoken Dialogue

No.	Lexeme	Singular				Plural			
		Female Singular Referent		Male Singular Referent		Mixed Sex Referents		Only Female Referents	
		Raw	NF	Raw	NF	Raw	NF	Raw	NF
1.	<i>Lehrer</i>	24/24	100	0/24	0%	4/24	16.6%	22/24	91.6%
2.	<i>Schüler</i>	24/24	100%	0/24	0%	1/24	4.20%	8/24	33.3%
3.	<i>Polizist</i>	24/24	100%	0/24	0%	0/24	0%	17/24	70.8%
4.	<i>Soldat</i>	6/24	25%	0/24	0%	0/24	0%	2/24	8.3%
5.	<i>Bundeskanzler</i>	23/24	95.8%	0/24	0%	0/24	0%	3/24	12.5%
6.	<i>Selfiemacher</i>	22/24	95.8%	0/24	0%	0/24	0%	18/24	75%
7.	<i>Iphoner</i>	23/24	95.8%	0/24	0%	0/24	0%	23/24	95.8%

Table 6. Frequency of gender-neutral innovations in Spoken, Unrehearsed Dialogue

No.	Lexeme	Singular				Plural			
		Female Singular Referent		Male Singular Referent		Mixed Sex Referents		Only Female Referents	
		Raw	NF	Raw	NF	Raw	NF	Raw	NF
1.	<i>Lehrer</i>	0/24	0%	0/24	0%	2/24	8.3%	0/24	0%
2.	<i>Schüler</i>	0/24	0%	0/24	0%	8/24	33.3%	4/24	16.6%
3.	<i>Polizist</i>	0/24	0%	0/24	0%	4/24	16.6%	2/24	8.3%
4.	<i>Soldat</i>	18/24	75%	10/24	41.6%	16/24	66.6%	20/24	83.3%
5.	<i>Bundeskanzler</i>	0/24	0%	0/24	0%	0/24	0%	19/24	79.2%
6.	<i>Selfiemacher</i>	1/24	4.2%	0/24	0%	0/24	0%	0/24	0%
7.	<i>Iphoner</i>	0/24	0%	0/24	0%	0/24	0%	0/24	0%

Table 8. Normalized Frequency of Gender Convention Used by Swiss Speakers

	Female	Male	Mixed-Sex	Female-Only
<u>generic</u>	2.52	100	87.5	19.16
<u>gender-fair</u>	97.48	0	4.16	61.64
<u>gender-neutral</u>	0.84	0	8.32	19.18

Results

Finding 1

Of the three options, **native speakers** used the **generic masculine** more frequently ($GS^* = 96.6\%$, $SS = 87.5\%$) than gender-fair forms (i.e., the *Paarform*) **when referring to mixed-sex referents**. [Unlike in written language]

Example: *ich sehe eine Gruppe von Lehrern [Vs] Lehrerinnen und Lehrern* (generic vs fair)

‘I see a group of teachers [Vs] female teachers and male teachers’

Implication: Ideologically imposed language is not always successful (underlyingly)

* GS = German Sample, SS = Swiss Sample

Finding 2

When referring to female-only referents the generic masculine was used frequently
(GS* = 42.2% , SS = 19.16%)

Example: *Die Lehrerin bringt den drei Schülern etwas bei*

‘The teacher-FEM-SG is teaching the three pupils-MASC-PL something’

Es ist eine Lehrerin und 3 Schüler

‘There is a teacher FEM-SG
and three pupils MASC-PL’



* GS = German Sample, SS = Swiss Sample

Implication: (1) Using the **generic masculine** may depend on the **pragmatic context**

(the other sex is implied)

“few realms in today’s society in which a group of people, whether soldiers, students, nurses etc. are unisex by expectation”

(2) Using the derivational morpheme *-in* may be superfluous sometimes and is therefore omitted by some speakers

[unless they want to emphasize the sex of the referents!]

“ich sehe drei Mädchen – sie sind Schüler”

‘I see three girls – they are pupils-MASC-PL’

“die Frauen sind Lehrer” ‘the women are teachers-MASC-PL’

Finding 3

- A **mixed effects logistic regression** was carried out to test whether there were any significant differences based on the geography
- Native speakers from **Germany** use the **generic masculine** statistically **more frequently** than speakers from Switzerland [$p = .001$]. **Swiss speakers** used **gender-fair innovations more frequently** than speakers from Germany

Geography was found to be a sociolinguistic variable regarding the treatment of gendered language in unrehearsed spoken dialogue.

Conclusion

1. The **GM is used more frequently** than gendered forms **in unrehearsed spoken dialogue**, which suggests something about ideological change and also the status of the GM
2. The **GM can be used to refer to female-only referents**, which also suggests something about the status of the GM and the importance of the **pragmatic context**
3. According to the sample, **German speakers used the GM** (statistically speaking) **more frequently than Swiss speakers**

Vielen Dank für Ihre Aufmerksamkeit!

Thanks for listening!

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