

## “Relax (and shut up!)”: On a Peculiarity in the German Debate on Gendered Language

A lot can be said about the German debate on gendered language, about valid and invalid arguments, discourses or popular ascriptions to political camps. It is no exaggeration to state that neither proponents nor opponents show any willingness to seek agreement or compromise – probably, because neither side sees a practicable possibility to solve the conflict in a linguistic way that satisfies both sides. Therefore, the same arguments are exchanged over and over with no or only little alternations resulting in a “mental immobility” that deepens the conflict without offering a convincing exit strategy.<sup>1</sup>

The topic ‘gendered language’ is old and has been discussed in German linguistics since the late seventies / early eighties (cf. Trömel-Plötz 1978, Pusch 1980). This long-forgotten issue re-entered the public discussion about 2018, after two decisions of the German High Court (*Bundesverfassungsgericht*). The first one concerned equality and personal integrity of intersex people (2017<sup>2</sup>), affecting the civil status law and allowing an intersex person (or their parents, respectively) to choose the sex entry ‘diverse’ in the birth register and other documents. The second decision (2018<sup>3</sup> by the *Bundesgerichtshof*; confirmed by the *Bundesverfassungsgericht* in 2020<sup>4</sup>) concerned the use of the generic masculine: Marlies Krämer, a social activist, didn’t want to be referred to as a *Kunde* (customer) by her bank but insisted on the female form *Kundin*. However, in its decision the Court held that *Kunde* has a “unisex” generic reading (next to the male-only reading).

Since 2018 the debate has been fueled by the demands of many activists that diverse (non-binary) persons should also be linguistically visible. Henceforth, the discussion has oscillated between these two fixed points – on the one hand the new civil status ‘diverse’, on the other hand the legally confirmed existence of the generic interpretation of masculine nouns and pronouns.

From the very beginning there is consistent complaint about the aggressive tone of the debate. This accusation comes from either side (gendering pro- and contra-activists) but the insulting attitude is rather associated with the anti-gendering front, which became publicly visible mainly by the *Verein Deutsche Sprache* (VDS): This non-scientific organisation of language purists started a petition under the name “Schluss mit dem Gender-Unfug”<sup>5</sup> (Stop the gender nonsense). This – very successful – petition (89.351 signers by 20.7.2022 / since 6.3.2019) was not only a signal of a massive resistance to gendered language but also an offence to pro-gendering activists. Many conservatives and right-wing populists sympathised with this petition and announced that in a sometimes abusive and intemperate way (“Gender-Gaga”, “Genderwahn”, “Orwell-Projekt” etc).<sup>6</sup>

The core point of my talk is that pro-gendering activists took – and still take – advantage of the fact that those who have objections towards gendered language are associated with the VDS or the political right (see e.g. Lobin 2020<sup>7</sup>, 2021<sup>8</sup>). Hence, critics of gendered language are pushed in a position where they constantly have to assure that they do not belong to the political right – which causes even more outrage and anger among them since they feel intentionally misinterpreted and treated unjustly.

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<sup>1</sup> However, see e.g. <http://gendern-aendern.de>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de/SharedDocs/Entscheidungen/DE/2017/10/rs20171010\\_1bvr201916.html](https://www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de/SharedDocs/Entscheidungen/DE/2017/10/rs20171010_1bvr201916.html) (Court decision on 10.10.2017; document accessed at 20.7.2022)

<sup>3</sup> <http://juris.bundesgerichtshof.de/cgi->

<bin/rechtsprechung/document.py?Gericht=bgh&Art=en&nr=82652&pos=0&anz=1> (Court decision on 13.03.2018; document accessed at 20.7.2022)

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de/e/rk20200526\\_1bvr107418.html](https://www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de/e/rk20200526_1bvr107418.html) (Court decision on 26.05.2020; document accessed at 20.7.2022)

<sup>5</sup> <https://vds-ev.de/aktionen/aufrufe/schluss-mit-gender-unfug/> (last access: 20.7.2022)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.afd.de/alice-weidel-die-sogenannte-gendergerechte-sprache-ist-ein-orwell-projekt/> (12.3.2019; last access: 20.7.2022)

<sup>7</sup> <https://scilogs.spektrum.de/engelbart-galaxis/die-sprachpolitik-der-afd/> (13.01.2021; last access: 20.7.2022)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.genderleicht.de/sprachkampf-interview-autor-henning-lobin/> (last access: 20.7.2022)

The pro-gendering wing often responds to this indignation with a cynical appeal to relax (“entspannt euch”<sup>9</sup>). In my paper I would like to focus on that particular move / trick and analyse its use and purpose in the debate on gendered language.

First and foremost, until now the relax command (inter alia in form of “entspannt euch”, “zunächst mal entspannen”, “mehr Gelassenheit”, “entspannter Umgang” etc.) has escaped linguistic (and public) attention – which is quite astonishing as googling the combination ‘entspannt gendern’ results in 1.150.000 hits (by 20.07.2022). Moreover – and quite obviously – the invitation to relax (*entspannen*) is insofar remarkable as this “invitation” can only be understood as an order to become silent. In this way, gendered language supporters portray themselves in a positive light, as if all aggression did not come from them but only from their opponents. Thus, the relax command mainly serves as an instrument of power: It delegitimises any criticism and denigrates the behaviour of the critic as over-excitement and exaggeration. All in all this is reminiscent of the popular devaluation of women as hysterics in the 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century.

In my talk I will present an in-depth analysis of what I refer to as the ‘relax command’, reveal historical parallels to independent and rebellious women that were described and pathologised as hysteric in order to silence them (see e.g. Cixous & Bird 1983, Appignanesi & Forrester 1992 for a critical reflection of Freud’s case study on his allegedly hysteric patient *Dora*) and show that the order to relax is only one of many problematic (stance) framings in the current discourse on gendered language in Germany.

## References

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<sup>9</sup> Of course „Entspannt Euch!” is an analogy to Stéphane Hessel’s book *Indignez-vous !* (2010) that was translated to German as “Empört Euch” and to English as “Time to Outrage!”.