

Attitudes Towards Gender-Inclusive Language: Latvian Twitter and Online Forum Threads

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**UNIVERSITY
OF LATVIA**

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Previous research

Current situation in Latvia:

Strelēvica-Ošiņa (2021):

- Conservatism, fear and intolerance reinforced by the usage of the English language
- Inclusive language - no longer part of top-down prescriptivism

Rirdance (2015); Veisbergs (2018); Štokenbergs (2021);
Raudsepa (2021)

Gender in Latvian

- **Two** grammatical genders – masculine (-s/-š, -is, -us) and feminine (-a, -e, -s)
- Adjectives agree in case, number, and gender (*vecā māja; jauns skolotājs, skaistas dziedātājas*)
- Common gender (neutral – *paziņa* (acquaintance), *būtne* (creature), *persona* (person); negative: *slepkava* (murderer), *plāpa* (chatterbox), *nejēga* (know-nothing))
- **Default gender** – masculine:
Smēķēt šeit ir aizliegts (Smoking is prohibited here); *visi cilvēki* (all of the people); *meklējam redaktoru* (we're looking for an editor)

Parallel usage of gender forms

Possible solution – **use of parallel forms:**

- *Meklējam redaktoru/redaktori* (seeking an editor)
- *Kāds/-a* (somebody)

But:

- *Ja sāksies ugunsgrēks, visi un visas iesim ārā* (If there's a fire, everybody will go outside)

Research questions

1. What are the most common associations people have with inclusive language? What concepts are most frequently related to it?
2. How is discourse about inclusive language and related topics (Latvian surnames, job titles, use of grammatical gender markings) constructed on Twitter?

Context

Twitter:

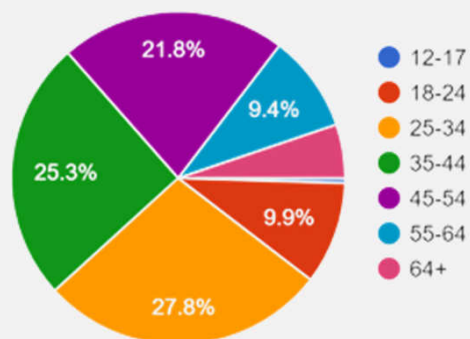
- 344 tweets
- Time period: January 2020 – August 2022
- Twitter keywords: *uzvārdi* (surnames), *profesijas* (professions), *nebinārs* (non-binary), *vietniekvārds* (pronoun), *dzimte* (gender), *gender*, *preferred pronouns* etc.
- Method: qualitative discourse analysis

Questionnaire

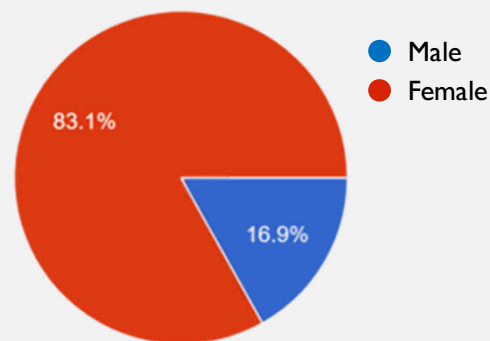
Questionnaire:

- 400 responses
- Method: content analysis

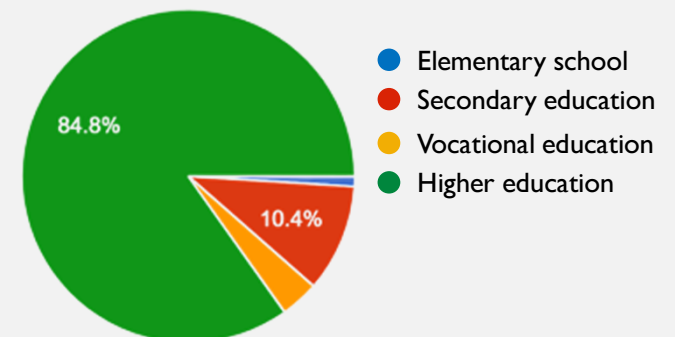
Age:



Sex:



Education:



1. What do you think of when you hear the words "inclusive language"?

Definitions of **inclusive language**:

- Language that does not offend, discriminate, demean, or exclude groups of people
- Language that avoids stereotypes, reduces prejudice and stigma
- Language that challenges supposedly unambiguous terms & expressions

Other keywords: neutral, democratic, easily-understood («*vieglā valoda*»)

Positive attitudes

Related to **positive** characteristics/values: respect, successful communication, tolerance, empathy, humanity

A sense of **community** and emphasis on society as a whole – consideration of others, fair treatment of everyone:

- *«an important ingredient for peaceful coexistence and exchange of ideas» (F 35-44)*
- *«a sign of an inclusive, democratic, modern and open society» (F 25-34)*

Mixed attitudes

Related to **change**:


- *«replacing outdated and even offensive terms» (F 18-24)*
- *«in Latvian it is sometimes difficult to find alternatives to common words – especially ones that are well-known to everyone and sound good» (F 25-34)*
- *«An OK idea brought to a relatively absurd state as a result of over-aggressive internet communication.» (M 25-34)*
- *«Language that is intended to be non-offensive but becomes offensive when taken to the extreme. For example, birthing person when talking about a woman.» (F 25-34)*

Negative attitudes

Change and «going too far» (Twitter):

- *Later as part of «inclusive language» it will be required to address listeners as «mammals» so as not to offend those who do not conform to polar binary categories. [...] (@ugisu 02.02.2022.)*
- *"Inclusive language" is just the beginning. Allowing and supporting absurdity sets a precedent for demanding more. The road to hell is paved with good intentions. (@kamaresku 30.01.2022.)*

Freedom versus oppression:

- 
- *«freedom from prejudice» (F 35-44)*
 - *«means of expression that don't impose unreasonable restrictions on the topic that's being discussed» (F 35-44)*
 - *«restrictions of verbal expressions to not offend/hurt a certain group of people» (F 55-64)*
 - *«a form of censorship that is justified with the desire to not offend anyone» (M 45-54)*
 - *«suppression of free speech» (M 18-24)*

Negative attitudes

Extreme comparisons:

- «*stupidification of people*» (F 35-44)
- «*in the long-run – annihilation of gender*» (F 45-54)
- «*the castration of language*» (F 45-54)
- «*seeds of fascism*» (M 55-64)

Linguistic manipulation:

- «*language distortion, artificial imposition of incorrect language forms*» (F 45-54)
- «*contemporary, nonsensical and artificial linguistic manipulation*» (M 25-34)

Inclusive language making Latvian more **complex** or more **vague**?

- «*complicated, inconsistent and unpredictable*» (F 35-44)
- «*the need to use many words to describe simple things*» (F 25-34)
- «*another attempt of making the language poorer*» (F 55-64)
- «*The inability or unwillingness to use direct language. For example, saying «dark white» instead of «black».*» (F 35-44)
- «*Falsehood, something that isn't unambiguous, soft language [..]*» (F 55-64)
- «*Unacceptable to call "things by their real names" – such an approach promotes double standards and opens the door to the normalization of various social oddities.*» (F 55-64)

Related to **minorities**:

- «*Excessive (unfounded) sensitivity [..] towards shameless minorities.*» (M 35-44)
- «*The need to choose expressions in order to adapt to the requirements of narrow groups.*» (F 45-54)
- «*unnatural language constructions to unduly indulge minorities*» (M 25-34)

The «**Snowflake Generation**» argument:

- «*Make sure you don't offend anyone.*» (F 35-44)
- «*You have to look specially for words to not offend somebody.*» (F 45-54)
- «*Speaking in such a way that as little as possible is said and nobody is able to perceive what is said negatively.*» (M 25-34)

The «**Snowflake Generation**» argument (**Twitter**):

- *But if it hurts someone who loves language very much, don't they have feelings? And who told you that life will be pain-free and nothing unpleasant will ever happen? (@zuravlevs 05.10.2021.)*
- *You'll be called what your name is in the student journal. Someone isn't always making a special effort to do you wrong. A teacher has to remember many students every day. Don't think that one trans person is so special that everyone is trying to get to him. (@unabomberz 05.10.2021.)*
- *And so everyone will have to jump around that snowflake so that, God forbid, they don't get offended? [...] (@editejurjane 05.10.2021.)*

Ideological attitudes

Keywords: **propoganda, politics, tradition:**

- *«a synonym for lies» (M 55-64)*
- *«unnatural, in a sense oppressive ideas that deny traditional, generally accepted things» (F 35-44)*
- *«cultural marxism» (F 25-34)*

Linguistic attitudes:

- *«monkeying around with English phrases that are unsuitable for Latvian» (F 55-64)*
- *«another confirmation that cultivated and correct language isn't important» (F 64+)*

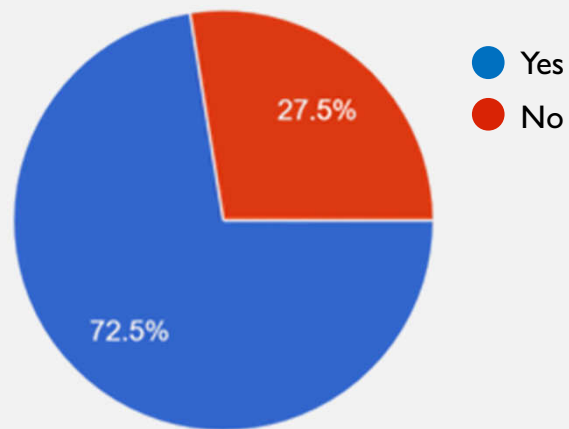
Ideological attitudes

Twitter:

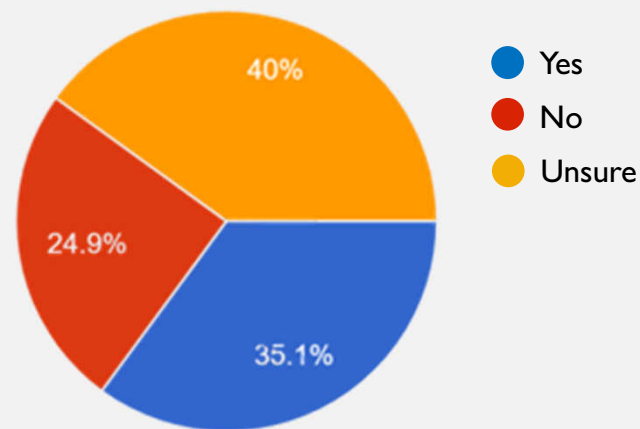
- *There have already been calls to change it so that the language can be adapted to the needs of «non-binary people». Either create a third gender or abandon the category of gender altogether. With what arguments can we preserve language identity, which is of greater value than participation in any union? (@Vents_Zvaigzne 31.01.2022.)*
- *[...] Trends are emerging in Latvia as well: LTV has already used the genderless form «child's parent» instead of «mother» and «father» multiple times. You're going to claim it was random? (@MartasTante 06.05.2021.)*

Inclusive language

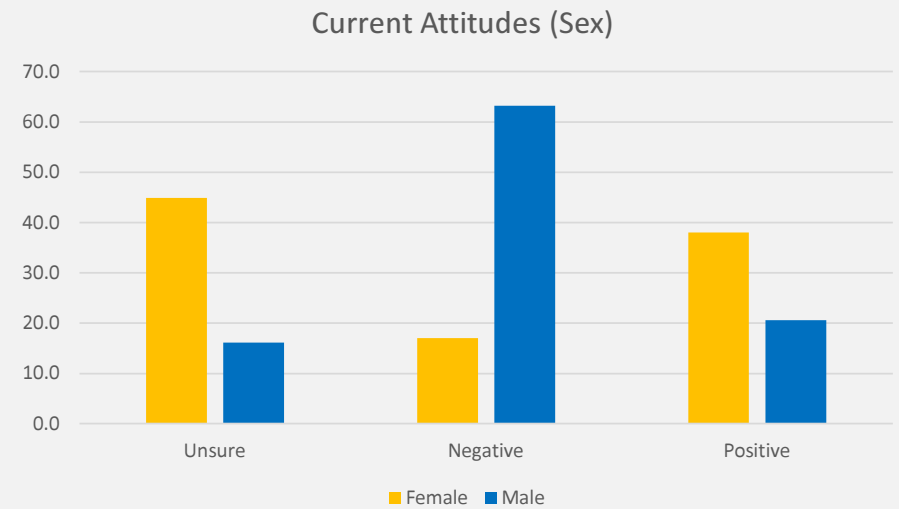
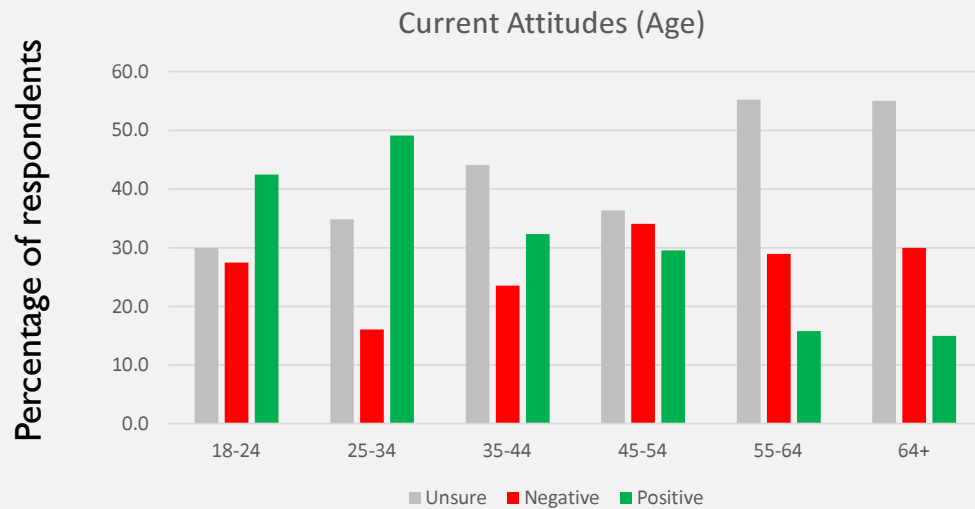
Have you heard of the term?



Current attitude:

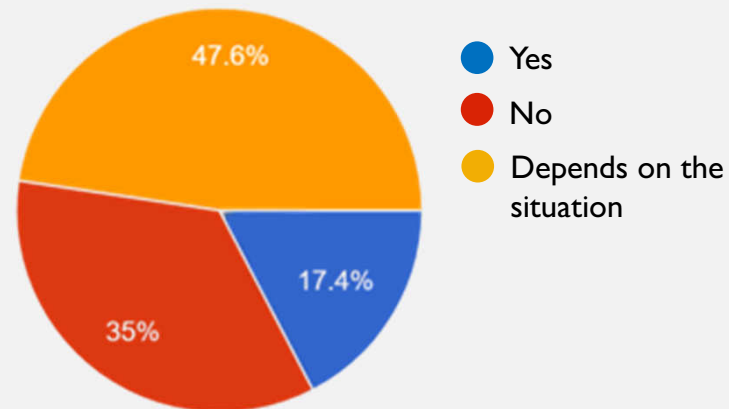


Attitudes by sex and gender



Parallel usage of gender forms

Should the use of the feminine gender be equal to that of the masculine gender?



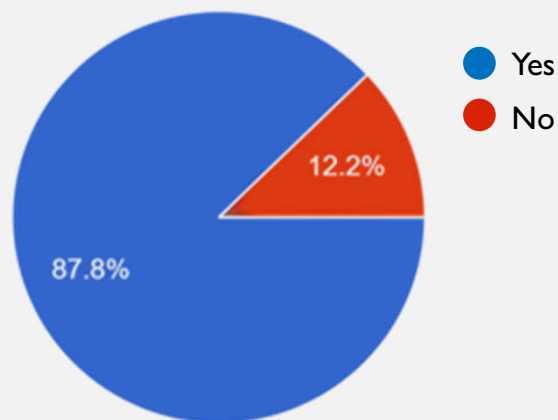
Main findings:

- The use of both genders in job advertisements (*dizainers/-e*, *sekretārs/-e*) as well as official texts and news
- Parallel use in writing, less in verbal speech
- Avoiding redundancy whenever possible (*mēs visi un visas*)

Note: «It's necessary to develop solutions that are gender-neutral [...] to not have to fix this «now let's include two genders» again in the future.» (F 25-34)

Surnames in Latvian

Are you satisfied with the pattern of creating surnames in Latvian?



**Kalniņš (m) : Kalniņa (f); Klints (m and f);
Liepa (m and f)**

Reasons for negative attitudes:

- Hypocritical application of norms
- Difficulties living abroad (Bondars, Bondare)
- Change in meaning (*Stūris* 'corner', *Stūre* 'steering wheel')

Note: Emphasis on surnames derived from common nouns (Liepa, Kalniņš)

Surnames in Latvian

Related to **inequality** and **unfairness**:

- *It's strange that in Latvian surnames for men are often not adapted to gender – Priede, Oga, Ābele, but a woman mustn't be Bērzs, Lācis or Vilks. (@jana_egle 18.04.2022.)*
- *In my opinion, it's a very annoying and unfair practice. P.S. I know a women whose husband is a Soms. Who is she? Figure it out yourselves. (@mordaans 18.04.2022.)*
- *Kļavis – a writer. It's about the fact that men are allowed everything. Both this and that. @jana_egle 19.04.2022.)*

«The possibility of using women's surnames in a gender-appropriate form prevents discrimination» (Strelēvica-Ošiņa, 2018)

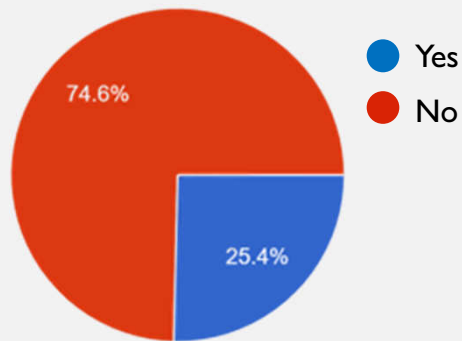
Surnames in Latvian

Linguistic attitudes:

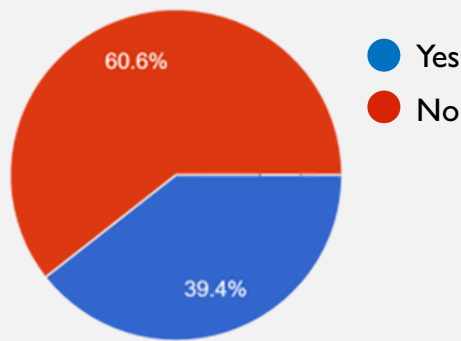
- *This illogical mutilation of surnames seems to have started in the Soviet times and has remained so. (@bowskis 18.08.2022.)*
- *Statutory, mandatory mocking of surnames («Latvianification») is something for which the implementers of this system deserve a wet paddle to the face. (@PavelsRe 06.06.2020.)*
- *I, however, can't stand the old style, I'd hate to be referred to as masculine [...] but I understand the pain, it'd be cool if you could change it after you come of age (@baletom2nj 17.08.2022.)*

Gender-neutral pronouns

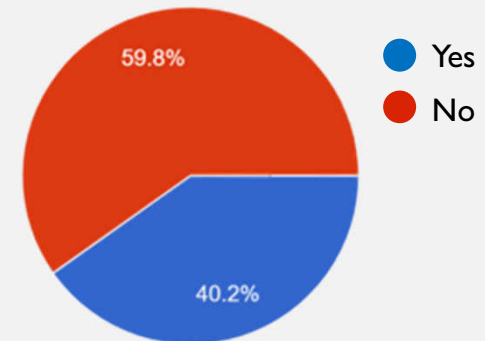
Would you **support** the implementation of similar changes in Latvian to make it more gender-neutral?



If such a change was made official and such pronouns were used in media, **would it affect your language use?**



If someone you **know** used these pronouns to refer to themselves, would it affect your language use?



Current:
Viņš/Viņa (He/She)

Gender-neutral pronouns

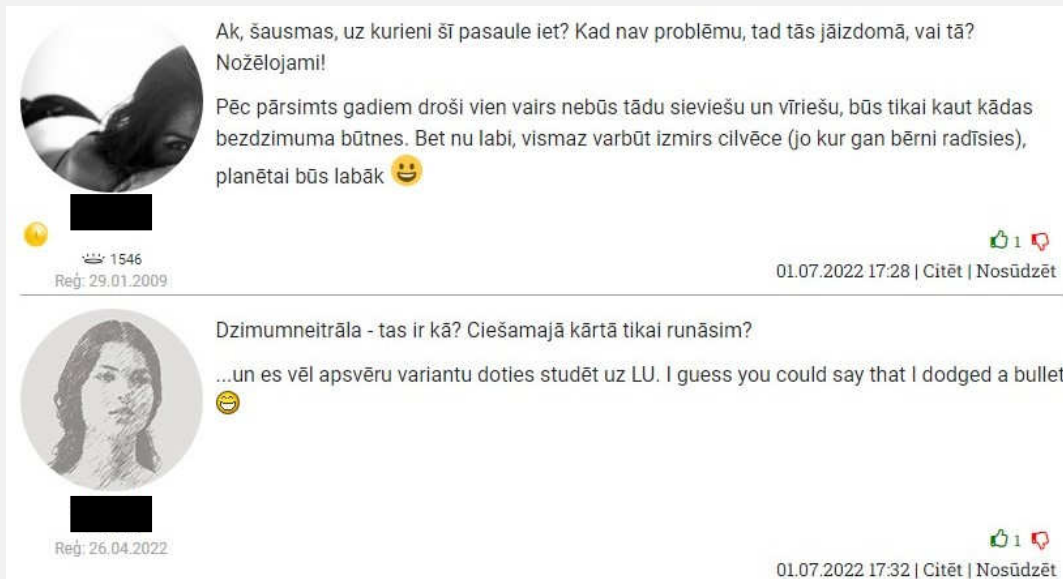
Difficulties with case:

- *There are indeclinable [words], but even those have grammatical gender. Because other words in the sentence are inflected. «Bruno ir labš darbinieks» - yes, Bruno is indeclinable, but the rest is. (@vardotaja 19.06.2022.)*
- *Both viš and viņo have the good old problem wth the rest of the words in the sentence, because, for example, viš/viņo ir lielisk(?) rakstniek(?) [...]* (@KugisB 19.06.2022.)
- Other issues: the default gender, borrowing from the Livonian dialect etc.

Pronouns in Twitter bios

- *Oh, I just saw you have pronouns in your profile. Had I seen it, I wouldn't have wasted my time, because now I've figured you out. (@iljenkof 14.07.2022.)*
- *Pronouns in the profile description means that this mister is more knowledgeable «than the average Latvian» in any area of conversation ;)*
(@ErtMerty 09.06.2022.)
- *Viņš/He/Him» - which mental illness do these pronouns indicate? Autism?*
(@tantenolaukem 09.06.2022.)

Online forums

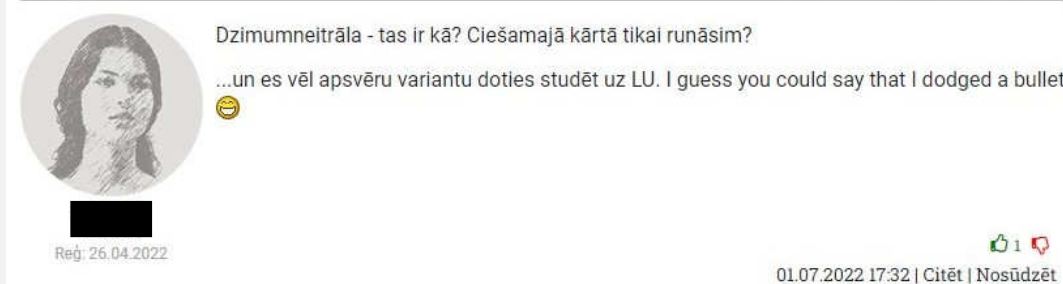


Ak, šausmas, uz kurieni šī pasaule iet? Kad nav problēmu, tad tās jāizdomā, vai tā? Nožēlojami!

Pēc pārsimts gadiem droši vien vairs nebūs tādu sieviešu un vīriešu, būs tikai kaut kādas bezdzimuma būtnes. Bet nu labi, vismaz varbūt izmirs cilvēce (jo kur gan bērni radīsies), planētai būs labāk 😊

1546
Reģ: 29.01.2009

01.07.2022 17:28 | Citēt | Nosūdzēt



Dzimumneitrāla - tas ir kā? Ciešamajā kārtā tikai runāsim?

...un es vēl apsvēru variantu doties studēt uz LU. I guess you could say that I dodged a bullet 😊

Reģ: 26.04.2022

01.07.2022 17:32 | Citēt | Nosūdzēt

«Oh, the horror, where is this world going? When there are no problems, you have to invent them, right? How pitiful! In a few hundred years there probably won't be any more women and men, **there'll only be some sexless beings.** Oh well, at least maybe humanity will die out (because where will the children come from), the planet will be better off.»

«Gender neutral – meaning what? **Will we only talk in the passive voice?** ...and I was still considering the option of studying at UL. I guess you could say that I dodged a bullet.»

Conclusions

1. There is a need for promoting key principles for inclusive language use
2. Emotionally charged discourse regardless of one's opinion on inclusive language
3. GIL is linked to progressive ideologies and political agenda
4. The majority of the negative attitudes stem from a lack of resources
5. Further research should focus on creating relevant and topical guidelines in Latvian

Sources

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Thank you for your attention!