

Attitudes towards gender-inclusive language.

A multinational perspective

London (online), 8th and 9th September 2022

Entspannt Euch!

**‘Relax (and shut up!)’: On a Peculiarity in the German
Debate on Gendered Language**

Dr. Ewa Trutkowski

Leibniz-ZAS Berlin

trutkowski@leibniz-zas.de



Leibniz-Zentrum
Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft

Structure of the Talk

- Background information on the debate on gendered language in German
- Exploration of the (meta-)discourse
- Discussion of some problematic stances and their pragmatic classification

With a focus on *Entspannt Euch!* (keep calm) which is suggested to the critics by the proponents of gendered language

(Historical) Background Info

Long after the beginning of the discussion led in Anglo-American linguistics the topic 'gendered language' entered the German linguistic world in the late seventies / early eighties, cf. e.g. Trömel-Plötz (1978), Pusch (1980); the latter is still active in the debate

- The debate was not as popular as it is nowadays
- One of the achievements was the use of affixed feminine forms (*Linguistin*) instead of generic masculines (*Linguist*) e.g. in certificates
- Be it a result of the feminist movement or not ...
 - the use of masculines in contexts where it is referred to a specific non-male person declined (at least in West Germany / the western part of Germany)
 - the use of generic forms in specific contexts is not common anymore, cf. ?*Anna ist Linguist* (instead of *Anna ist Linguistin*)

Jurisdiction (as for today)

The issue of gendered language re-entered the public discussion about 2018, after two decisions of the German Federal Constitutional Court (*Bundesverfassungsgericht*).

- The first one concerned equality and personal integrity of intersex people (2017), 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 by the *Bundesgerichtshof* (= Federal Court of Justice); confirmed by the *Bundesverfassungsgericht* (= Federal Constitutional Court) in 2020) 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).

The Current Debate in a Nutshell (1)

- Masculine forms not only have a specific male reading but also a “generic” reading which covers people of all sexes / sexual identities / genders, e.g. in *Als Linguist verdient man weniger als ein Banker* (As a linguist one earns less than as a banker). Ambiguities are an integral part of language; in such cases the context disambiguates the ambiguous form.
- However, some refuse the masculine as a generic form by citing studies which show that masculine (pro)nouns are predominantly associated with male persons (e.g. Gygas et al. 2008, Vervecken & Hannover 2015).

The Current Debate in a Nutshell (2)

- Instead of using the generic masculine *Mitarbeiter* (*employees_{masc}*), proponents of gendered language propose ungendered forms, cf. *Mitarbeitende* (*the employed*) or neo-forms as *Mitarbeiter*innen* (also in variants with a gap _ colon : etc.).
- Critics claim that associations cannot be set equal to meanings (Zimmermann 2014) since they are
 - subjective (= individual),
 - private (= not accessible to others) and
 - irrelevant (= e.g. salt can be associated with the sea, a soup ...).Meaning of salt = a mineral (NaCl). Meaning is independent of associations. Association studies do not constitute crucial evidence.

On Reference (vs. Inclusion)

- After the new jurisdiction, a discussion emerged how to refer to transgender/intersex people linguistically.
- However, the search / discussion never centered around an adequate addressation (a particular name or expression) for non-binary people but focused on inclusiveness. This is shown by the datum in (1):

(1) *Hans ist Linguist, Anna ist Lehrerin und Manu ist Spion*in.*

Hans is linguist.masc, Anna is teacher.fem and Manu is spy.nb

(1) is grammatical, but uttering (1) would result in outing *Manu* as a non-binary person (which *Manu* may not want). I.e., neo-forms have a specific reading, which is barely used. Instead, neo-forms function as new generics / unspecific plurals.

Neoforms as *Linguist*innen* are specified for all sexes. Generically interpreted masculines as *Linguisten* are underspecified with respect to sex (Zifonun 2021, Trutkowski & Weiß to appear): Their intension differs, but their extension is the same.

The Core of the Dispute

Given that the generic interpretation of both forms has the same reference, it is clear that the dispute is not really about semantics.

→ **But what is it about?**

Gendered language touches the interface between grammar and sociology: I.e., there are two very different approaches to the topic

- (Possibly) because of that either side claims interpretational sovereignty and shows disdain for the other: „They have no idea of gender as a social category“ vs. „They have a simple-minded understanding of grammar / the grammatical system“
 - See e.g. Nübling’s insulting misrepresentation in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung* (7.8.2022) and the reply from Bayer, Bierwisch, Sternefeld, Vogel, Weiß and Zifonun in *Die Welt* (21.8.2022)

Fixed Attitudes

- Proponents of the generic masculine do not see why a widespread and common form should be replaced
- Proponents of gendered language will never accept a form that shows a male bias in association studies

Is this a problem?

Generally not: It is standard in scientific disputes that neither side is going to be „convinced“ by the view of the other. However, scientific exchange takes place in order to share (new) arguments, data evidence and explanations

- But in the gender debate scientific exchange is on a very low level; the evidence (and competence!) of either side is not accepted as being crucial
- Lack of scientific exchange results in a fixed duality (mental immobility)

Interim Summary

- Not so much the lack of willingness to seek agreement or compromise is problematic but rather different linguistic accounts with respect to the question of generic reference (grammar-related vs. linguistic equality-policy)
- Arguments from different linguistic worlds are not exchanged which leads to “cocooning” effects on either side
 - Isolation and malicious allegations instead of discussion and exchange
 - (Passive-)aggressive behaviour

Some Problematic Frames & Stances

1) Naming

‘gender-inclusive’ / ‘gender-fair’ language

2) Associations with political camps

positioning of others & self-positioning

3) *Entspannt Euch!*

The order to relax (and shut up)

Naming

Gendered language is commonly referred to by the expressions *genderinklusive*, *gendersensible* or *gendergerechte Sprache* (gender-inclusive / gender-sensitive / gender-fair language)

- Implies that the use of generic masculines does not include non-binary persons

Instead of using the expression ‘generic masculine’ proponents of gendered language speak of the ‘so-called generic masculine’

- Implies that the masculine does not have a generic meaning (which it has without doubt, see e.g. Trutkowski 2018 for an acceptability study)

As a consequence, proponents of the generic masculine speak of *gendern* and ‘so-called’ gender-inclusive / gender-sensitive / gender-fair language

- By using this or that wording a person takes a particular stance in the discourse
- Defining oneself as a person that thinks and acts inclusive, fair and sensitive: positive self-definition includes a negative allegation wrt the “other” side

Associations with Political Camps

- The *Verein Deutsche Sprache* (VDS), a non-scientific organisation of language purists, started a petition under the name “Schluss mit dem Gender-Unfug” (Stop the gender nonsense).
- This very successful petition (89.822 signers by 07.09.2022 / since 6.3.2019) was not only a signal of a massive resistance to gendered language but the manner of expression was of course 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.)

Associations with Political Camps

Unfortunately...

- 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, 2021).
- As a consequence, 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.
- I.e., the split between pro-gender vs. contra-gender is transferred to a political level where the pro-gender camp is associated with *left, open-minded* and the contra camp with *right/conservative, narrow-minded*
- Clearly, such associations are unsophisticated and only deepen the conflict

Political(ly correct) Pragmatics

- The use of generic masculines is so widespread, even in very alternative media (*taz*, *jungle world* etc.), that one can hardly say that their use involves a particular stance-taking
- In contrast, the use of gendered language can be understood as taking a political(ly correct) stance – associated with inclusiveness, diversity, political left etc. This is also one of the reasons why many companies use gendered language (open-minded, diversity-friendly framing, “pink washing”)

The non-use of gendered language can be striking in communication where gendered language is set as a standard, e.g. through institutional guidelines

- In such cases the non-use of gendered language constitutes a violation of the cooperative principle, cf. Grice (1991(1975):26): “Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.”

Entspannt Euch! Relax!

[Gendern: Macht es oder lasst es - aber regt euch bitte nicht auf](https://www.brititte.de)
<https://www.brititte.de> › Liebe › Persönlichkeit

10.11.2021 — Kolumne Kopfkarussell Wie **Gendern** unsere Sprache und unser Denken ... bilden einen Stuhlkreis und reden einmal ganz **entspannt** darüber.

[Gendergerechte Sprache: Was soll das Gendern und wie geht ...](https://www.gespraechswert.de)
<https://www.gespraechswert.de> › gendergerechte-sprache-...

Bleib **entspannt**. Sprachwandel ist Teil des gesellschaftlichen Wandels. — Bleib **entspannt**. Sprachwandel ist Teil des gesellschaftlichen Wandels. Wie spreche ...

[Richtig gendern – Handlungsempfehlung für soziale ...](https://www.conceptera.ch)
<https://www.conceptera.ch> › aktuelles › richtig-gendern...

09.06.2020 — Richtig **gendern** – Handlungsempfehlung für soziale Organisationen ... **Gender-Gap** ... professionelle Unterstützung und **entspannen** Sie!

[Gesprächsrunde „Entspannt gendern“ - Taunus-Nachrichten](https://www.taunus-nachrichten.de)
<https://www.taunus-nachrichten.de> › oberursel › gespra...

24.08.2022 — Gesprächsrunde „**Entspannt gendern**“.
Oberursel (ow). Die Gemeinde St. Petrus Canisius lädt für Dienstag, 6. September, ...

[Leibniz-Institut für Deutsche Sprache zum Gendern: Seien Sie ...](https://www.mdr.de)
<https://www.mdr.de> › ... › Wissen › Mensch & Alltag

04.08.2022 — **Gendern** ist zum Kampfbegriff geworden. ... Weniger Ideologie, mehr Toleranz beim **Gendern**. ... Wir stehen dem **entspannt** gegenüber.

The screenshot shows the dict.cc website interface. At the top, the search bar contains 'entspanner' and the search button is labeled 'Suche'. Below the search bar, there are navigation links for 'Home', 'About/Extras', 'Vokabeltrainer', 'Fachgebiete', 'Benutzer', 'Forum', and 'Mitmachen!'. The main content area displays a table of search results for the word 'entspannen'. The table has two columns: 'Englisch' and 'Deutsch'. The 'Englisch' column lists various English phrases and their German translations. The 'Deutsch' column lists the German word 'entspannen' with its grammatical information (NOUN, VERB, SYNO) and a list of English translations. The number of hits for each translation is also shown.

Englisch	Deutsch
-	NOUN das Entspannen - edit
-	VERB ¹ entspannen entspannte entspannt edit
-	VERB ² sich entspannen entspannte sich / sich entspannte sich entspannt edit
-	SYNO [sich] ausrasten [österreich.] ... ☺
to relax	entspannen 1809
to release tech.	entspannen [freigeben, z. B. Werkzeug, Werkstück] 415
to slacken	entspannen 178
to ease sth. [situation]	etw. entspannen [Situation] 141
to unbend [relax]	entspannen 42
to uncock weapons	entspannen 15
to depressurize sth. tech.	etw. entspannen [etw. drucklos machen] 8
to wind down [coll.]	entspannen
to slack off [ease off, slacken off]	entspannen [lockern, z. B. Kabel, Muskel]
to slacken off [ease off]	entspannen [lockern, z. B. Kabel, Muskel]

1.760.000 hits for entspannt gendern

Why do proponents of gendered language want their critics so notoriously to relax?

What's behind *Entspannt Euch*?

- 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 1.760.000 hits (by 06.09.2022).
- Moreover – and quite obviously – the invitation to relax and cool down (*entspannen*) is insofar remarkable as this “invitation” can only be understood as an order to become silent.

I want to make the following points with respect to *Entspannt Euch* (cool down, relax):

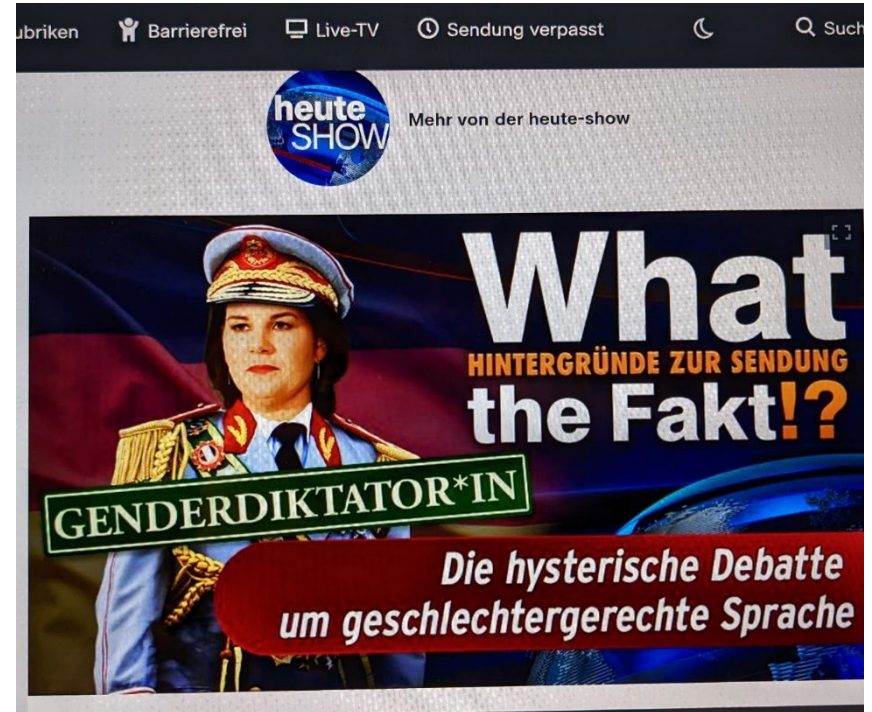
- (i) The directive speech act that it includes (and the respective consequences)
- (ii) The implicit reference to hysteria (over-excitement and exaggeration)
- (iii) The anti-feministic move (exaggeration, hysteria as a typical women's “disease”)

Entspannt Euch (gefälligst)! Will you (Kindly) Shut Up!

- Hypothesis: Request to relax should be understood as a directive speech act. The latter, so Searle (1975:355), doesn't have to be formulated as an explicit order: "The illocutionary point of these consists in the fact that they are attempts [...] by the speaker to get the hearer to do something. They may be very modest "attempts" as when I invite you to do it or suggest that you do it, or they may be very fierce attempts as when I insist that you do it."
- But the relax command is a complex speech act: It does not only include the speaker's 'order speech act' but also the performance of silence by the hearer.
- The latter 'obey and shut up speech act' is also a directive act: Since the speaker "asks" the hearer to be silent, it functions similar to questions: "Questions are directives, since they are attempts to get the hearer to perform a speech act." (Searle 1975:356)

Over-Excitement & Exaggeration

- Obviously, the person who takes orders is in an inferior position
 - 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.
 - It portrays gendered language supporters in a positive light, as if all aggression did not come from them but only from their opponents.
- this is reminiscent of the popular devaluation of women as hysterics in the 19th/20th century



ZDF, heute-show, 4.6.2021 (satiric)

(Women &) Hysteria

Although hysteria was not only attributed to women, it were mostly women who were pathologised as hysteric.

- In our current understanding hysteria was a vehicle that allowed to silence women, see e.g. Cixous & Bird (1983), Appignanesi & Forrester (1992) for a critical reflection of Freud's case study on his allegedly hysteric patient *Dora*.
- *Dora* quit therapy with Freud – and can thus be seen as what hysterics really were: independent and rebellious women.
- As to this, the order to keep calm (in analogy to “please don't be hysteric”) is an anti-feministic act.

Conclusion

- Different linguistic access points
- Discussion proceeds unscientifically and irrationally
- Ideological and moral charging through problematic stance-taking and their pragmatic content
 - 1) Suggestive Naming
 - 2) Superficial association with political camps
 - 3) The order to relax

References

- Appignanesi, Lisa & John Forrester (1992). *Freud's Women*. New York: Basic Books.
- Cixous, Hélène & Sarah Bird (1983). "Portrait of Dora". *Diacritics* (13:1), pp. 2-32.
- Freud, Sigmund (1971). *Studienausgabe Band VI. Hysterie und Angst*. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer.
- Lobin, Henning (2020). <https://scilogs.spektrum.de/engelbart-galaxis/die-sprachpolitik-der-afd/> (8.9.2021; last access: 20.7.2022)
- Lobin, Henning (2020). <https://www.genderleicht.de/sprachkampf-interview-autor-henning-lobin/> (last access: 8.9.2022)
- Pusch, Luise F. (1980). „Das Deutsche als Männersprache – Diagnose und Therapievorschlage“. *Linguistische Berichte* 69, pp. 59-73.
- Searle, John R. (1975). „A Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts. Language, mind, and knowledge“. *Minnesota studies in the philosophy of science*, Volume 7, pp. 344-369.
- Trömel-Plötz, Senta (1978). "Linguistik und Frauensprache". *Linguistische Berichte* 57, pp. 49-68.
- Trutkowski, Ewa (2018a). „Wie generisch ist das generische Maskulinum? Über Genus und Sexus im Deutschen“, in: Meinunger, André (ed.), *Im Mittelpunkt Deutsch, ZAS Papers in Linguistics* 59. Berlin. Leibniz-Zentrum Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft, S. 83–96 [DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21248/zaspil.59.2018.437>].
- Trutkowski, Ewa & Helmut Weiß (to appear): „Zeugen gesucht! Zur Geschichte des generischen Maskulinums im Deutschen“, [manuscript: <https://ling.auf.net/lingbuzz/006520>]; appears in *Linguistische Berichte*.
- Zifonun, Gisela (2021). „Eine Linguistin denkt nach über den Genderstern“. In: *Sprachreport* 37.2, 46–51.