

## Original Paper

# The German Generic Masculine Debate: Psycholinguistic Evidence and Gender-Fair Language Practices

Zhi Li<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Deutsches Seminar, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, Freiburg, Germany

\* Zhi Li, Deutsches Seminar, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, Freiburg, Germany

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### Abstract

The “generic masculine” (German: *Generisches Maskulinum*) has sparked ongoing controversy in discussions of gender-fair language in German. Through systematic review of relevant literature, this study reveals that psycholinguistic empirical research confirms the generic masculine leads to significant male-biased associations at the cognitive level, indicating a divergence between its theoretical function as a gender-neutral form and its actual cognitive effects. Alternative strategies such as paired forms and neutralization expressions can increase the proportion of female associations, though each has limitations. Emerging forms such as gender asterisks and gender gaps attempt to achieve inclusive representation of diverse gender identities, yet have triggered further debates. The findings demonstrate that gender-fair language practices have transcended purely linguistic dimensions, touching upon fundamental questions about the relationship between language, social categorization and its representation. The German experience provides important insights for understanding gender issues in languages.

### Keywords

German language, generic masculine, gender-fair language, psycholinguistics, gender visibility

### 1. Introduction

As a language with a grammatical gender system, German’s “generic masculine” (*Generisches Maskulinum*) phenomenon has generated sustained controversy in gender-fair language discussions. The so-called “generic masculine” refers to the dual grammatical function of German masculine personal nouns, which can specifically denote males or generically refer to all genders. Since the emergence of feminist linguistics in the 1970s, however, the gender fairness of this usage has been questioned: Does the generic masculine truly achieve gender neutrality? Does its use render women

linguistically “invisible”?

In response to these questions, extensive psycholinguistic empirical research has been conducted in German-speaking regions, attempting to reveal the gender-biased effects of the generic masculine at the cognitive level. In actual language use, various alternative strategies have been developed, including paired forms, neutralization expressions, and gender asterisks. These alternative forms themselves, however, have sparked new controversies: Can they genuinely promote gender equality? Through literature review, this study systematically examines the linguistic controversies surrounding the German generic masculine, psycholinguistic empirical research, and the development of gender-fair language in German, providing reference for understanding gender issues in grammatical gender languages.

## **2. German Grammatical Gender System and the Generic Masculine Controversy**

### *2.1 German Grammatical Gender System*

German nouns are classified according to three grammatical genders: masculine, feminine, and neuter. Grammatical gender, however, does not systematically correspond with natural (biological) sex. This incongruence manifests in two ways: first, inanimate nouns carry grammatical gender (e.g., *der Tisch* “table” [masculine], *die Sonne* “sun” [feminine], *das Buch* “book” [neuter]); second, even animate nouns may show divergence between grammatical gender and biological sex (e.g., *das Mädchen* “girl” [neuter], *die Person* “person” [feminine, yet applicable to any gender]). While the grammatical gender system as a whole exhibits such arbitrariness, within the category of person-denoting nouns, German has developed a highly systematic gender-marking pattern.

For person-denoting nouns, German typically employs the masculine form as the base, with the suffix *-in* deriving the corresponding feminine form. This pattern applies to occupational titles (e.g., *Lehrer* “teacher” → *Lehrerin* “female teacher”; *Arzt* “doctor” → *Ärztin* “female doctor”), identity designations (e.g., *Bürger* “citizen” → *Bürgerin* “female citizen”; *Teilnehmer* “participant” → *Teilnehmerin* “female participant”), as well as relational terms (e.g., *Freund* “friend” → *Freundin* “female friend”; *Nachbar* “neighbor” → *Nachbarin* “female neighbor”). This feminine formation process constitutes a derivational procedure known as *Movierung* in German word formation. Significantly, this derivational process demonstrates both systematicity and productivity: the vast majority of masculine human-reference nouns can form corresponding feminine forms through *-in* suffixation, and this rule extends to virtually all neologisms. However, this word-formation mechanism inherently encodes semantic asymmetry—the masculine form functions as the root form, while the feminine form is derived from and dependent upon it, manifesting morphologically as the “marked member”. Beyond this word-formation asymmetry, this masculine-based structure confers upon the masculine form a distinctive semantic function.

The core manifestation of this distinctive function is the generic masculine phenomenon. The generic masculine refers to the capacity of both singular and plural masculine person-denoting nouns to function as gender-unmarked generic terms. From a grammatical-functional perspective, these masculine nouns possess dual semantics: in specific contexts, they denote exclusively male individuals or groups (specific usage); in other contexts, they refer generically to categories where gender is unknown or inclusive of all genders (generic usage). This semantic multifunctionality derives from the “unmarked” feature of the masculine form, enabling it to transcend specific gender reference and achieve abstract categorical denotation.

**Table 1. Generic and Specific Functions of German Personal Nouns—Using *Student* as an Example (adapted from Kotthoff & Nübling, 2018)**

Number	Function Type	Form	English Translation
Singular	Generic masculine	<i>der Student</i>	“student (generic)”
	Gender-specific	<i>die Studentin</i>	“female student”
	Gender-specific	<i>der Student</i>	“male student”
Plural	Generic masculine	<i>die Studenten</i>	“students (generic)”
	Gender-specific	<i>die Studentinnen</i>	“female students”
	Gender-specific	<i>die Studenten</i>	“male students”

## 2.2 Generic Masculine Controversy and Alternative Strategies

The critique of the generic masculine in German originates in feminist linguistics’ interrogation of structural asymmetry in German person-denoting nouns. As early as 1984, Pusch (1984) explicitly characterized German as a masculine language (*Männersprache*), developing her argument on two levels: first, from a lexical-compositional perspective, most feminine person-denoting nouns referring to women are derivatives of masculine nouns, establishing the masculine form’s privileged status as base form at the lexical level; second, even when independent feminine nouns exist (e.g., *die Krankenschwester* “female nurse” [feminine]), German systematically creates masculine counterparts (e.g., *der Krankenpfleger* “male nurse” [masculine]) as new base forms, from which feminine derivatives are then generated (e.g., *die Krankenpflegerin* “female nurse” [feminine]), further consolidating masculine primacy. This structural asymmetry is not historically arbitrary. From a historical-linguistic perspective, Doleschal (2002) demonstrates that the generic masculine as a prescriptive grammatical norm was codified in the 19th century, essentially reflecting the projection of the male-dominated social structure of that era onto linguistic form.

However, the fundamental problem of the generic masculine extends beyond its historical origins to encompass the ambiguity generated by its dual functionality. Specifically, because generic usage and

male-specific usage are formally identical, the generic masculine in actual use readily loses its generic function and is instead interpreted as denoting exclusively male referents (Irmel & Köhncke, 1996). The cognitive mechanism underlying this phenomenon, as Diewald and Nübling (2022) observe, is that speakers unconsciously establish associations between grammatical gender and biological sex when processing human reference.

To address the problems posed by the generic masculine, German has developed three main alternatives: paired forms, internal capitalization, and neutralization strategies.

**Paired forms** (*Paarform*) explicitly lists both masculine and feminine forms, as in *Studentinnen und Studenten*, *Student/innen*, *Student(innen)* (“female and male students”). The advantage of this strategy lies in its unambiguous gender reference; however, the disadvantages are equally pronounced: the formation is lengthy and cumbersome, and research by Pöschko and Prieler (2018) demonstrates that excessive deployment of paired forms significantly reduces text comprehensibility.

**Internal capitalization** (*Binnen-I*) inserts a capital letter within the word, as in *StudentInnen*. Compared to paired forms, this method offers greater conciseness; its principal limitation, however, is non-conformity with German orthographic conventions, making it difficult to be widely accepted in formal written language.

**Neutralization expressions** (*Neutralisierung*) encompass three specific forms: first, nominalized participles (e.g., *Studierende* “those who are studying,” i.e., “students”); second, nominalized adjectives (e.g., *Angestellte* “those who are employed,” i.e., “employees”); third, gender-unmarked abstract expressions (e.g., *Lehrkraft* “teaching personnel,” i.e., “teacher”). The main advantage of this strategy lies in preserving linguistic fluency while effectively avoiding gender controversy. Neutralization expressions, however, also possess limitations: on one hand, they may alter the original semantic emphasis—*Student* foregrounds student identity, whereas *Studierende* highlights the act of studying; on the other hand, the available inventory of neutralized vocabulary remains relatively limited, making it difficult to cover all designation contexts.

### **3. Results of Psycholinguistic Research on the Generic Masculine**

Since the early 1990s, cognitive psychology and linguistic studies in German-speaking regions have tested the gender-association effects of the generic masculine through various experimental paradigms, including text continuation tasks and reaction time measurements. These studies reveal the gender-biased effects of the generic masculine in cognitive processing across multiple dimensions.

#### *3.1 Male-Biased Associations of the Generic Masculine*

Irmel and Köhncke (1996) used reaction time measurements to examine how singular generic masculine nouns (definite or indefinite) influence gender associations. With 45 participants and 200 sentences, the experiment showed that 80% of participants chose “no” when judging “whether a

generic masculine noun refers to females”, while 85% chose “yes” for male reference. When the generic masculine was used with definite articles, the association between generic masculine and male referents reached 90%. In terms of reaction time, definite usage of the generic masculine produced the shortest response times when matched with male associations. These findings demonstrate clear male-biased associations for singular generic masculine forms.

### *3.2 Comparing the Effectiveness of Alternative Strategies*

Researchers have also examined whether various alternative strategies can improve the balance of gender associations. Klein (1988) compared gender-association effects of the generic masculine and paired forms through text continuation experiments, asking 158 participants to continue sentences containing personal designations and add character descriptions. Results showed that generic masculine nouns (e.g., *Einwohner* “resident”) produced approximately 70% male-reference continuations, while paired forms (e.g., *jede Einwohnerin/jeder Einwohner* “female resident/male resident”) reduced male associations to 61% and increased female associations to 30%.

Beyond paired forms, the effectiveness of other alternative strategies has also been tested. Stahlberg and Sczesny (2001) confirmed that both paired forms and neutralization expressions significantly increased the proportion of female associations compared to the generic masculine. Kusterle (2011) investigated morphological aspects of gender associations and found that plural forms of generic masculine can activate female associations more than singular forms, because gender-marking morphemes (such as the definite article *der*) are more salient in the singular form, reinforcing male associations.

### *3.3 Influence of Contextual Factors*

The cognitive effects of the generic masculine are not determined solely by linguistic form itself; contextual factors also play an important role. Several studies show that gender stereotypes in context influence the interpretation of the generic masculine. Braun et al. (2007) and Irmens and Roßberg (2004) reveal that in male-stereotyped contexts (e.g., *Astronaut* “astronaut”), the generic masculine triggers stronger male associations, while in female-stereotyped contexts (e.g., *Kindergarten teacher* “kindergarten teacher”), this bias is weaker. This finding suggests that the gender bias in the generic masculine interacts with stereotypical gender schemas.

## **4. The Rise and Controversy of Gender-Fair Language**

As previously mentioned, extensive empirical research confirms that the German generic masculine does not produce proportionally equal reference to male and female groups. Based on this finding, debates over “how to achieve gender-fair language” have continued for nearly forty years. This debate shows two main developments: on one hand, increasing numbers of alternative expressions have been recommended by public institutions in German-speaking regions to achieve visible representation of

women; on the other hand, with Germany's passage of the General Equal Treatment Act (*Allgemeines Gleichbehandlungsgesetz*) in 2006 and the legalization of third gender and same-sex marriage in 2017, merely achieving linguistic equal visibility for binary genders no longer satisfies social needs.

This shift in social needs is reflected in linguistic policy practices across German-speaking regions. For example, the city government of Freiburg, Germany, in its 2019 Gender and Diversity Language Guidelines (*Gender & Diversity in Wort und Bild*), states that gender-sensitive language (*geschlechtersensible Sprache*) should achieve clarity, representativeness, and non-discrimination in personal reference (Stadt Freiburg, 2019). The guidelines emphasize that while traditional alternatives such as paired forms have increased equal representation of male and female groups, they remain limited to two genders in linguistic form, thereby reinforcing binary gender concepts. In response to this limitation, two emerging forms have appeared:

The first is the **gender gap** (*Gender Gap*): inserting an underscore “\_” between masculine and feminine forms (e.g., *Student\_innen* “students”), pronounced as a glottal stop in spoken language. Supporters argue that this form can express the equal status of all genders, achieving diverse visibility including categories such as age, disability, ethnicity, and religion.

The second is the **gender asterisk** (*Gender Stern*): inserting an asterisk “\*” between masculine and feminine forms (e.g., *Student\*innen* “students”), also pronounced as a glottal stop in spoken language. Supporters believe this form not only encompasses males and females but also accommodates other gender identities, namely the LGBTTIQ community (lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender people, transsexuals, intersex people, and queer), representing diverse expressions of gender identity and sexual orientation.

Although these two forms have sparked controversy both in linguistic debates and in general public discourse, they have received increasing recognition in the linguistic policies of public institutions across German-speaking regions. In practice, the promotion of these emerging forms has evolved clearly over time. In the 2017 and 2018 Freiburg language guidelines, paired forms still ranked first among language usage recommendations; however, since 2019, gender asterisks and gender gaps have become the top two recommendations. Additionally, the **gender colon** (e.g., *Student:innen* “students”) as another variant has been gradually adopted by more institutions and individuals. In September 2021, the Baden-Württemberg State Conference on Equal Opportunities in Higher Education (LaKoG), in its Recommendations for Gender-Fair Language (*Empfehlungen für eine geschlechtergerechte Sprache*), explicitly emphasized that writing methods such as gender asterisks/gaps/colons better express gender diversity, marking the shift of German gender-fair language practice from female visibility to diverse gender inclusion (LaKoG, 2021).

## 5. Controversies and Reflections on Gender-Fair Language Practices

At the theoretical level, the controversy surrounding the generic masculine begins with the definition of the concept itself. Nübling (2018) emphasizes that the term *generisch* (“generic”) originally referred to masculine nouns that abstractly denote a category itself rather than specific members within that category, constituting *non-referential* and *non-identifying* usage. In such truly generic, non-referential usage, the nouns do not point to specific individuals, and therefore the gender attributes of any potential referents are irrelevant. However, Nübling (2018) also points out that most current discussions about the generic masculine have gone beyond this boundary, more often involving the generalizing uses of masculine personal nouns with specific referentiality—that is, nouns used to refer to persons whose gender is unknown or irrelevant in the current context.

This shift from pure categorical expression to specific contextual application has triggered a deep contradiction in gender-fair language practices: in addressing the generic masculine problem, these practices have moved from pragmatically gender-irrelevant usage to the opposite extreme of pursuing highly gendered expression. In this pursuit of gender-fair language, the focus of debate has gradually shifted from “how to achieve linguistically equal gender reference” to a phenomenon of excessive symbolization. As Kotthoff (2022) argues, the choice of gender symbols (asterisk, underscore, or colon) functions primarily as markers of progressive group membership and moral superiority rather than effective tools for achieving actual gender-symmetric representation. This tendency has even produced highly gender-marked neologisms such as *Vorbilderinnen* and *Vorständin* (Note 1).

While questioning the direction of language reform, Kotthoff (2022) further points out that inserting symbols such as gender asterisks and gender gaps in textual personal reference cannot, as language guidelines claim, effectively represent the gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, and other diverse attributes of the referred persons. The core of her critique is that the pursuit of symbolization in personal reference implies that only those who use such writing methods truly think about and respect issues such as gender diversity. This sense of moral superiority, as Starke (2021, author’s translation) states, causes linguistic gender expression to be “protected like a sovereign sign, and any damage seems to be a sacrilegious act.” This practice of binding language choices to moral judgment intensifies debates. Notably, some gender asterisk supporters themselves acknowledge that compared to achieving linguistic visibility for women or other non-male groups, they are more concerned with demonstrating a generally progressive attitude through these writing methods (Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland, 2021).

Faced with this tendency toward excessive symbolization in language, Kotthoff (2022) emphasizes that genuinely caring about gender-symmetric reference in texts requires flexibly choosing different expressive methods according to actual needs in different contexts, with no necessity to use gendered personal reference methods throughout entire texts. Excessive symbolization not only fails to solve

gender inequality problems but may also reduce language reform to a form of formalistic performance, thereby deviating from the original intention of gender-fair language.

## **6. Conclusion**

Through systematic review of literature on the German generic masculine and gender-fair language, this study reveals complex interplay among linguistic forms, cognitive mechanisms, and social practices.

First, psycholinguistic empirical research confirms that the generic masculine produces male-biased associations at the cognitive level, showing significant divergence between its theoretical function as a gender-neutral form and actual cognitive effects. These studies provide scientific evidence for feminist linguistic critiques and establish an empirical foundation for gender-fair language reform. Second, gender-fair language practices have evolved from female visibility to diverse gender inclusion, from paired forms and neutralization expressions to emerging forms such as gender asterisks and gender gaps, reflecting society's shift in gender concepts from binary opposition to diverse inclusion. However, these practices have also sparked new controversies: Is gendered language expression an effective means of promoting gender equality, or merely performative politics?

Current discussions have transcended mere linguistic-cognitive dimensions, highlighting the complexity and multiple tensions of language reform. Supporters argue that language use shapes social cognition, and gender-equal expression in language helps promote gender equality in reality; opponents contend that excessive symbolization departs from the communicative essence of language and may reduce language reform to formalistic labeling practices. This debate essentially addresses a core question that has occupied the linguistic community since the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: the relationship between language and reality—namely, to what extent can language reform promote social transformation?

German's exploration of gender-fair language provides important reference for understanding gender issues in grammatical gender language more broadly. Gender issues in language are not only linguistic questions but also interdisciplinary topics involving sociology, cognitive science, and gender studies. In-depth exploration of this issue contributes to constructing more equal and inclusive linguistic practices.

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### Note(s)

Note 1. *Vorbilderinnen* and *Vorständin* are neologisms that exemplify hypergendering in contemporary German gender-fair language. *Vorbilderinnen* derives from the neuter noun *das Vorbild* (“role model”), whose standard plural *die Vorbilder* is already gender-neutral despite its *-er* ending. Creating the feminine plural *Vorbilderinnen* introduces gender marking where none existed. *Vorständin* represents the feminine derivative of *der Vorstand* (“board”/“board member”), which functions both collectively (referring to the entire board as a gender-neutral institution) and individually (referring to board members). The feminine form *Vorständin* thus marks gender even where the original term operated without gender specificity.