

“Gendering” from a sociolinguistic perspective

Qualitative interviews with a non-academic clientele on their attitudes and styles of person references¹

This article presents a study of qualitative interviewing in which experiences with and opinions on “gendering” were elicited from 23 men and women of different ages. The topical domain covered by the German-English term “Gendern” (“gendering”) is very complex in a gender language such as German. Diwald/Steinhauer (2017, p. 5) understand “Gendern” in German as “sehr allgemein gesprochen, ein sprachliches Verfahren, um Gleichberechtigung, d. h. die gleiche und faire Behandlung von Frauen und Männern im Sprachgebrauch, zu erreichen. Gendern bedeutet somit die Anwendung geschlechtergerechter Sprache”. This essentially concerns references to people (nouns and pronouns) as gender-specific or gender-neutral. To avoid masculine forms which are meant to be gender neutral (such as *Lehrer*, meaning a “person who teaches”) due to their potential ambiguity and later to ensure linguistic recognition for non-binary people as well, starting in the late 1970s many alternative reference strategies emerged (Kolek 2019). Equal opportunities teams in municipalities, universities and companies published guidelines which prescribed that their administrative staff use specific spellings and recommended that their clientele follow them too. New spelling options at morpheme boundaries (Schüler* :innen) should explicitly include non-binary people; these options were disseminated via the guidelines and handled very flexibly overall. Over the last few decades there have been heated debates in the German-speaking world in relation to the project as a whole (Lobin 2021; Meuleneers 2023).

In connection with “gendering” we can observe a wide variety of spelling and pronunciation options, which can be positioned by competent agents in a socio-symbolic cosmos and connected to political stances (e. g. conservative, progressive, feminist, queer, Kotthoff 2020). Conservative daily newspapers do without “gendering”, feminist publications make use of one particular spelling (*SchülerInnen*) and queer-feminist ones of another (*Schüler*innen*).

Using a qualitative social sciences approach, the intention of this study was to capture attitudes among a non-academic clientele to the new and traditional styles of person reference in German in a more nuanced way than in the experimental tests commonly used in the psychology of language; these aim to find out initial associations of person references in short texts. Such experimental tests dominate research (Kotthoff/Nübling/Schmidt 2018). The semi-structured interviews should also shed light on how the interviewees experience new forms of spelling and pronunciation (for example, *pupils* in German is pronounced as a feminine plural noun with a glottal stop before the feminine suffix: *fʏ:lɐʔmən*), including those who do not even notice internal differentiation in styles of “Gendern” with their various salient features. Honer (2003) justifies employing this method for issues in the social sciences as follows: in an interview, the interviewee is challenged to actively recon-

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struct events, experiences and knowledge. Qualitative interviews may not be representative but they do get very close to subjective experience.

The interview study was mainly carried out by a group of female students participating in a seminar at the University of Freiburg. The 23 interviewees argued to a greater or lesser extent either for or against certain forms of “gendering” and in doing so modalized their utterances, expressing their attitudes towards this aspect of language using lay expressions. They adopted positions not only on the topic in question but also towards their counterpart, the student interviewer, who they assumed would have a pro-attitude and topic-specific competence. Argumentation theory and concepts such as positioning, stance and linguistic intuition were used in the analysis. This article provides insights into a broad spectrum of opinions and stances in a group of people working in skilled trades and service professions with intermediate educational qualifications who have hardly been considered in the “Gendern”-research to date. Experimental research on gender and person reference in psychology has mostly been carried out in academic settings so far. In one way or another the interviewees drew on their linguistic awareness and their own speech repertoire but also on backdrops and stances (Jaffe 2009). They expressed their preferences for person reference in the discursive context of the interview revealing positionings (Harré/Langenhove 1999) in relation to themselves, their age and habits and above all, to the topic of “Gendern”.

The interviewees were asked, for example, whether they thought it makes sense to mainly use the gender-neutral participle “Studierende” as it is common at universities nowadays, replacing the generic masculine “Studenten” for this group, as was the case forty years ago. Of course, linguistic terms were not used at all in the guidelines for the interview. Such nominalized participles are one important strategy in “gendering”. The interviewees were then shown three versions of a tourist guide to the market place in Freiburg, which includes many references to people, and they should comment on this freely. One text made use of generic masculine plural nouns like *Touristen* and *Freiburger*, a second one used the asterisk integrated in the feminine plural (*Freiburger*innen*), a strategy which has been employed for many years, and the third version used a mixture of both.

In this corpus of 23 interviews, six were categorized as being pro-“gendering”, six as being against and eleven as having a critical standpoint. Those with pro-attitudes generally argued in favour of “gendering” strategies being used; those who were against found such strategies unnecessary and thought that gendered texts were not easy to read. Those who positioned themselves as being in favour of “gendering” started from the premise that the connections between grammatical gender and sex are very close. Along those lines, masculine references tend to evoke associations with men, which can and should be thwarted with the help of “gendering”. Those classified as being “critical” considered “gendering” to be context specific: on the one hand they found many attempts at “gendering” to be excessive; on the other hand they believed that a formally masculine reference could really be problematic, especially when stereotypical knowledge evokes male associations. They conceded different ways of seeing and experiencing “gendering” other than their own. This resulted in a scale from pros via critical voices to cons.

The marked modalizing distinguished the remarks of these laypeople we interviewed from those of the experts in media debates. Paul Meuleneer’s (2023) analyses of arguments in favour of or against “gendering” in the media reveal little modalization. Here the positions

are often irreconcilable. The modalization strategy of concession was mainly used by those in favour of “gendering” (interviews 1, 5, 6, 7 and 17 being slightly critical). In several interviews, there was internal differentiation in relation to gender-sensitive strategies; almost all interviewees emphasized their attitudes to be subjective and personal rather than objective.

Du Bois (2007, p. 141) thematizes the connection between styles and group values: “Community-relevant values which are activated via specific stances define a frame of interpretation of the speaker’s position for the other interactants”. We are not concerned with gender equality here, for everybody considers this to be important, but rather with the stances towards traditional or reformed person references. The older man in interview 3 categorized “gendering” as belonging to the progressives, for example, and did not consider himself to be one of those. Such categorisations are frequently found in academic and media discourse as well (Lobin 2021). The young mechanic in interview 17 assigned “gendering” to linguistically very talented people and did not consider himself to be one of those either. Factors such as age and competence are therefore important when ascribing styles of “gendering” to particular groups. Jaffe’s (2009, p. 5) characterization of the “trigger of ideological disputes” absolutely applies to the topic under discussion here.

In the 23 interviews carried out in Germany we encountered a broad range of stances towards “gendering”. The following factors were employed to classify an attitude as being in favour of, critical about or against “gendering”:

Activism

Commitment to “gendering” identified the interviewees as being in favour (1, 2 and 7).

Sensitivity to inclusion

Those who expressed a certain sensitivity towards inclusion could have a critical attitude towards some of the strategies of “gendering” but were unlikely to reject all parts of the reform package. In interviews 2, 5, 6, 8, 9, 12 and 17, the respondents commented on the need to make it clear that not only men are associated with person references (9: *Frau will net immer zurückstoh*) while 11 was of the opinion that the topic is not important for women with low levels of education or for older people.

Upgrading or downgrading the relevance of “gendering”

Denying the relevance of “gendering” was usually a sign of a critical or negative attitude. The opposite is true for upgrading its relevance, which went hand in hand with the attribution of an anti-patriarchal function. Explicit downgrading can be found in interviews 3, 4, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 21, 22 and 23, putting them in the category of being critical towards or against “gendering”. Interviews 5 and 7, in contrast, upgraded its relevance.

Differentiating between strategies

All interviews included comments on the various strategies of “gendering”. Even interviewees who were in favour of it commented critically on the use of the asterisk in person reference. Interviewees 1, 2 and 4 were critical about the use of the asterisk while 12 thought positively of it, 7 advocated the use of a generic feminine form, 8 wanted to use expressions which were as neutral as possible, 9 thought that everybody should feel addressed when being welcomed and 12 found “gendering” only important in non-fiction

but not in fiction. Finally, 16, 17 and 19 saw “gendering” as being a major hurdle for those learning German as a foreign language.

When it comes to the tone of arguments on the topic, it is noticeable that it was not nearly as harsh in these interviews as on internet platforms, where insults are commonplace (Acke 2023). There are many nuances between clear pros and cons, which is what this paper set out to capture.

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