

## ***Der Häftling ist schwanger* [the [m] prisoner is pregnant] – gender neutrality in relation to non-gender-inflected designations for persons using *-ling* derivatives as an example**

The re-emergence of *-ling* as a productive suffix in New High German (cf. Leonhard/Siegel 2019) can be said to run counter to efforts to make German more gender inclusive. In contrast to most other nouns describing persons, the feminine suffix *-in* cannot be added to derivatives like *Feigling* [coward], *Häftling* [prisoner] or *Flüchtling* [fugative]. In our study, we investigated the gender referentiality of these designations by carrying out an online survey in which participants were presented 45 different terms designating people. These included nine *-ling* derivatives in the singular (*Feigling*, *Flüchtling*, *Häftling*, *Jüngling* [youngling], *Lehrling* [apprentice], *Liebling* [darling], *Prüfling* [test taker], *Säugling* [infant] and *Zwilling* [twin]). The participants were asked to decide whether the designations were associated with males, females or both sexes. We also collected biodata (age, gender, highest educational attainment) in order to investigate the potential influence of extralinguistic factors.

The bound derivational morpheme *-ling* is an old German affix. It is attached to roots or bases and determines the grammatical gender and part of speech of the derivative (a masculine noun). In dictionaries, the meaning of such terms is generally formulated without reference to natural gender, as words ending in *-ling* no longer have a feminine equivalent ending in *-in* and therefore cannot be used generically (cf. Leonhard/Siegel 2019, pp. 175 f.). In morphological descriptions, too, the general assumption is that *-ling* derivatives are gender neutral (see, for example, Elsen 2011, p. 86; Hoberg 2004, p. 102). We hypothesize that some *-ling* derivatives are not gender neutral in fact and principally refer to male persons. One of the aims of our study is, thus, to make a contribution to the use of gender-inclusive language which counteracts inequality and discrimination.

When assigning the *-ling* words to a category, the participants chose masculine in 45.7% of all cases on average, with 49.5% selecting masculine/feminine and 4.8% feminine. Thus, terms to describe people which end in *-ling* are hardly ever associated with females. When the *-ling* derivatives are analysed individually, it becomes clear that the strength of the association with maleness or gender neutrality (i. e. masculine and feminine) varies considerably. In the case of *Jüngling* and *Häftling*, almost all participants chose maleness. Masculine gender can already be present in the root, as in *Jüngling* (*Junge* = boy), or be reflected in reality or knowledge of the world, as is the case with *Häftling* in that the proportion of male convicts in prison is much higher than that of females. The terms *Feigling*, *Lehrling* and *Flüchtling* were associated with maleness by around half of the participants while the other half considered them to be gender neutral. Perceptions of the remaining words, namely *Liebling*, *Prüfling*, *Zwilling* and *Säugling* were quite different, with these terms obviously being the most gender inclusive. Various factors could be responsible for this. *Liebling* is not a common noun but is principally used as a term of endearment and a form of address without an article (e. g. *Hallo, Liebling!* [Hello, darling!] or *Liebling, wie geht es dir?* [How are you, darling?]). Here masculine gender is not expressed explicitly by the article. As *Liebling* can be used to address people of any gender, this could explain

the relatively frequent association with females only. Although *Prüfling* was associated with females much less frequently than with males, the vast majority of participants considered *Prüfling* to be gender neutral. One explanation for this could be the everyday reality of our participants: all of them were test takers at school, and also at university, if applicable. Thus their experience clearly showed them that *Prüfling* applies to males and females alike. *Säugling* and *Zwilling* were classified by most of the participants as gender neutral, with a similar number choosing female only or male only. The gender-neutral connotation of *Säugling* can again be explained by our knowledge of the world: although it certainly is socially relevant for infants to be classified as being male or female, babies' natural sex is not yet that obvious. While *Zwilling* can be used to refer to people of any age, whether an individual is a twin is primarily relevant at an early age when they are most likely to be seen together with their twin and be identified as twins. As children's natural sex is not yet or not that overt either in comparison to adults, the term *Zwilling* is more commonly perceived as gender neutral.

None of the *-ling* derivatives was exclusively associated with females. As already mentioned, the terms *Häftling* and *Flüchtling*, for example, are not gender neutral based on our knowledge of the world. Taken in isolation, they tend to refer to men. This is also why sentences like *Der Häftling ist schwanger* [The [m] prisoner is pregnant] or *Der Flüchtling trägt ein Kleid* [The [m] fugitive is wearing a dress] are considered to be marked: the fact that these designations are referring to women is only established at the end of the sentence with the predicative adjective *schwanger* or the direct object *Kleid*. It is thanks to the syntactic-semantic context that the gender of the subject is revealed.

Our analysis of the social parameters revealed that responses to the *-ling* derivatives partly depended on the participants' sex, educational background and age. For example, in some cases, male and female participants did not agree on which of the *-ling* derivatives they were more likely to associate with maleness or gender neutrality. A comparison of the participants with or without a degree showed that the largest differences occurred with the word *Lehrling*: over half of those who had studied decided that the word was masculine, compared to only a quarter of those who had not studied. One explanation for this is that the term *Lehrling* varies in importance in our participants' everyday lives (see above). There were also differences by age when it came to assigning maleness to individual *-ling* derivatives. The youngest age group chose masculine more frequently than the oldest age group. This can be traced back to a general increase in awareness of gender-sensitive language: older speakers are more used to the generic use of masculine terms than younger speakers, who appeared not to accept that the (supposedly gender-neutral) masculine term was really gender neutral. Gender inflection for terms to describe people which, then, explicitly address women are becoming increasingly common in the everyday language spoken at school, university and work.

Prototype theory (cf. Heider 1971, for example) starts from the premise that members of a conceptual category can be subdivided into good and bad examples of the category. In other words, a blue tit and not a penguin is a prototypical bird. This can have to do with typical attributes associated with members of the category (e. g. +/- able to fly) or with the participants' range of experiences (while in Germany a sparrow or blackbird is a prototypical example of the category *bird*, in the USA it is a robin (cf. Rosch 1975)). Our test items behaved in a similar manner. When participants are asked to state their associations with specific concepts, as was the case in our study, the main representatives of the individual

categories formed using *-ling* (*Flüchtling*, *Häftling*, *Zwilling*, etc.) have an important role to play. Accordingly, when asked to respond intuitively, participants associated the context-free lexeme with the prototype of the *-ling* derivative concerned. For most of the participants, this prototype was masculine in some cases (*Häftling*, *Jüngling*) and gender neutral in others (*Säugling*, *Zwilling*). None of the *-ling* derivatives was prototypically female. This could, in turn, be due to the grammatical gender of the *-ling* derivatives, which is masculine. We surmise that this makes it very unlikely for *-ling* derivatives to designate persons whose typical representatives are female. This makes it even more important to replace *-ling* derivatives whose prototypical representatives are generally associated with maleness (*Häftling*, *Flüchtling*) with terms which make use of gender inflection or which are neutral in order to counteract inequality and discrimination by using gender-neutral language. In the case of *-ling* derivatives whose prototypical representatives are gender neutral (*Säugling*, *Liebling*, *Zwilling*), in contrast, the use of terms to describe people which differentiate between gender plays a subordinate role as speakers certainly associate these lexemes with both genders.

## References

- Elsen, Hilke (2011): *Grundzüge der Morphologie des Deutschen*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter.
- Heider, Eleanor (1971): 'Focal' color areas and the development of color names. In: *Developmental Psychology* 4, 3, pp. 447–455.
- Hoberg, Ursula (2004): *Grammatik des Deutschen im europäischen Vergleich. Das Genus des Substantivs. (= amades 3)*. Mannheim: Institut für Deutsche Sprache.
- Leonhard, Jens/Vanessa Siegel (2019): *SPDling, Systemling, Veganling – Eine morphologisch-semantische Analyse neuer ling-Derivationen im Gegenwartsdeutschen*. In: *Deutsche Sprache* 47, pp. 174–190.
- Rosch, Eleanor (1975): Cognitive representations of semantic categories. In: *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 104, 3, pp. 192–233.