

Ärztinnen und Pfleger, Biologen oder Chemikerinnen: Alternating pair forms as a means of gender-inclusive language in Die Zeit

This article examines the emergence and usage of alternating pair forms (e. g., *Ärztinnen und Pfleger*, ‘doctors [f.] and nurses [m.]’) as a gender-inclusive language strategy in contemporary German, with particular emphasis on their appearance in the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*. Unlike regular pair forms (e. g., *Leserinnen und Leser*, ‘female and male readers’), alternating pair forms coordinate two lexically distinct personal nouns, one of which is a derived feminine form marked by the suffix *-in*, to evoke a generic reading. This approach not only contributes to inclusive language practices but also challenges the traditional dominance of masculine generics by incorporating feminine generics – feminine-marked forms used generically to denote mixed or unspecified groups.

The corpus analysis draws on issues of *Die Zeit* from 2000 to 2023, which are included in the German Reference Corpus (DEReKo). The *Zeit* corpus comprises over 167,000 articles totaling more than 179 million tokens. Through a combination of regex-based extraction and manual data cleansing, 975 alternating pair forms and 11,249 regular pair forms were identified. Although alternating forms constitute a much smaller share overall (7.98%), their use has increased significantly since *Die Zeit* formally implemented gender-inclusive editorial guidelines in 2018. Nonetheless, regular pair forms are much more frequent across both periods.

Additionally, alternating pair forms have a high type-token ratio (0.89), indicating considerable lexical diversity and contextual adaptability. By contrast, regular pair forms have a significantly lower ratio (0.13), reflecting their conventional and repetitive application. This distinction is further underscored by sequencing preferences: while regular forms predominantly follow a fixed feminine-first order, alternating pair forms present a nearly balanced distribution between feminine-first and masculine-first arrangements. This structural variability enhances their capacity to reflect thematic and contextual nuances, facilitating the representation of diverse social groupings and relationships.

A context-driven analysis of all alternating pair forms within the framework of Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA) identifies four principal functions in the linguistic construction of social categories:

- 1) **Common field of activity:** Terms from the same professional or relational field (e. g., *Virologinnen und Epidemiologen* ‘virologists [f.] and epidemiologists [m.]’; *Freunde und Kolleginnen* ‘friends [m.] and colleagues [f.]’) are combined to express affiliation to a shared social domain.
- 2) **Symbolic contrast:** Combinations such as *Busfahrer oder Zahnärztin* (‘bus driver [m.] or dentist [f.]’) and *Kassierer oder Managerin* (‘cashier [m.] or manager [f.]’) are used to highlight differences or polarities in status or public perception.
- 3) **Symbolic condensation:** Forms like *Flugkapitäne oder Managerinnen* (‘pilots [m.] or managers [f.]’) and *Postboten oder Pflegerinnen* (‘mailmen [m.] or nurses [f.]’) function as symbolic place holders to represent broader domains, e. g., well-paid or precarious jobs, without a direct semantic relationship between the components.

- 4) **Functional complementarity:** Pair forms such as *Patientin und Therapeut* ('patient [f.] and therapist [m.]') or *Schüler und Lehrerinnen* ('students [m.] and teachers [f.]') express interdependent, complementary roles within institutional or interpersonal settings.

These functions demonstrate that alternating pair forms are not merely used as a gender-inclusive language strategy; they also operate as discursive resources for constructing, negotiating, and contesting social categories and hierarchies.

Another key contribution of the paper is the empirical identification of feminine generics in the corpus. A total of 410 distinct feminine lemmas (grouped by singular/plural forms) were identified within the alternating pair forms, with most appearing in the plural. The most frequent include *Ärztin* ('doctor'), *Lehrerin* ('teacher'), *Journalistin* ('journalist'), and *Erzieherin* ('preschool teacher'). Notably, some of these, such as *Professorin* ('professor') or *Managerin* ('manager'), reflect traditionally male-dominated professions, suggesting a deliberate subversion of occupational gender norms. Others, like *Erzieherin* ('preschool teacher') or *Verkäuferin* ('saleswoman'), derive from female-dominated sectors, raising critical questions regarding the (re)production of gender-stereotypes in occupational discourse.

Manual annotation of 41 selected *Zeit* articles containing multiple alternating pair forms revealed their frequent co-occurrence with other person reference strategies, including masculine generics, gender-neutral nouns, and gender-specific references to individuals. Gender-neutral forms accounted for the largest proportion (33.6%), followed by masculine generics (28.6%). Although feminine generics remained rare (2.4%), their presence was reliably observed in texts featuring alternating pair forms. Notably, feminine generics were absent in studies based on randomly sampled texts, underscoring the methodological advantage of targeting texts with alternating constructions. Consistent with earlier corpus findings, the analysis also affirms a persistent gender imbalance in person reference, with significantly more references to men (15.1%) than to women (8.0%).

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that alternating pair forms serve as linguistically innovative and socially resonant instruments for gender-inclusive communication. By combining familiar syntactic structures (i. e., the pair form surface) with novel semantic functions, they enable more nuanced and context-sensitive representations of social actors. As such, alternating pair forms hold significant promise for both linguistic research and practical implementation in gender-aware discourse.

The findings open several avenues for future research, including:

- Psycholinguistic studies on reader comprehension and acceptance of alternating pair forms compared to other gender-inclusive strategies.
- Sociolinguistic research on their reception among non-binary and genderqueer individuals.
- Cross-media and cross-genre corpus studies to evaluate the diffusion of alternating pair forms beyond print publications, particularly in spoken language and online contexts.