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StudentInnen, Student*innen, or Student_innen: How Six German Universities are Constructing Gender Equitable Language and Increasing Female Linguistic and Visual Representation

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StudentInnen, Student*innen, or Student_innen: How Six German Universities are Constructing
Gender Equitable Language and Increasing Female Linguistic and Visual Representation

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Introduction

As the most widely spoken language in the European Union, the German language's influences reach far beyond the country's borders. With the language comes its own constructs—verb conjugations, sentence syntax, and the unique gendering of nouns—which. Unlike Standard English, each German noun belongs to a gender category, either masculine, feminine, or neuter, denoted by the respective definite pronouns *der*, *die*, and *das*. These genders are essential to determining the declination and case of the noun and must be memorized in order to correctly speak and understand the language. Assigned somewhat arbitrarily, the gender of the noun is not usually indicative of the noun's physical or conceptual qualities. For example, *der Stuhl* (chair) is masculine in gender, yet the noun itself does not inherently have male-like qualities. Similarly, *die Lampe* (lamp) is gendered as feminine, but a lamp cannot be said to be female-like since it is an inanimate object, lacking human characteristics. Furthermore, *das Bett* (bed), while denoted as neuter, exemplifies no apparent qualities that would warrant its neutral expression in German.

This aforementioned form of gendering is typical for German; however, certain nouns do depend on the subject's gender, such as professional titles. While studying at a university, the title of the student is separated by gender: *der Student* (male student) and *die Studentin* (female student). This addition of *—in* to a professional title is how the feminine, singular form is created. This distinction of gender also occurs in the plural form of professional titles with the addition of *—en* to the singular form: *die Studenten* (male students) and *die Studentinnen* (female students). Within this scenario, the definite pronoun *die* does not communicate gender but

instead plurality. Interestingly enough, in a group of students with mixed genders, both female and male present, the form of the professional title defaults to the generic masculine plural form, so typically a group of mixed gendered students would be described as *die Studenten*. While this is technically grammatically correct, there is an apparent discord created when a word that grammatically signifies a group of all males is also used to represent both males and females.

The Debate

This lack of representation has become a hot topic within Germany over the last few decades with those against and for language-based changes formulating and citing valid arguments. However, alterations to the presence of both genders or gender at all in official address have begun. At the beginning of January 2019, the first municipality, Hanover, chose to rewrite its constitution and other official documents to be more inclusive, utilizing gender neutral language. Hanover's Mayor Stefan Schostok reasoning for the support of this change originates from his desire to provide a framework for the city that reflects all citizens linguistically, stating, "Diversity is our strength. This is an important signal and a further step toward ensuring that all people, regardless of their sex, be addressed in the fundamental ideas of our city's image as well as the implementation thereof in our administrative language" (Shelton).

In addition, universities across Germany have engaged in this debate by increasing representation, specifically non-stereotypical, for females through language and visual arts. Therein lies the largest source of controversy: How are places of higher education instituting linguistic symmetry for both females and males? Since there exists not just one way of formulating professional titles, organization names, and other forms of address, various methods, mainly proposed by Lann Hornscheidt—a Gender Studies professor at Humboldt

University—and the AG Feminist Language Action, circulate as possible routes for addressing the dominate generic masculine (Trenkamp). Published in 2014, their brochure *Was tun? Sprachhandeln-aber wie? W_ortungen statt Tatenlosigkeit!* sparked major controversy due to the publicity surrounding their suggestions for professional title recommendations, proposing the integration of various symbols, letters, and altered spellings as modifications for the current lack of representation (13). Even though Hornscheidt and their colleagues crafted these addresses as creative suggestions, the negative reception took or appeared to take their various recommendations as possible future law that would be enforced, applying a critical lens that created discord in the debate regarding what universities actual had begun to implement versus Hornscheidt and their colleagues proposed in their brochure.

Intervening at this area of incongruity requires a complete dissection of the call for gender equitable speech, Hornscheidt's brochure, its critical reception, the arguments against the evolution of the German language, how major universities have approached linguistic equality, and the arguments in favor of modifying language to be more inclusive. For the sake of this research, the use of the terms gender and sex will be used interchangeably since most of the dialogue focuses on creating gender symmetry and does not advance into the debate of sex versus gender identity. This thesis discusses specifically the popular misconceptions concerning equal language at German universities and seeks to delve into the greater importance of this discord: What does the equalizing of speech mean in the greater scheme of the German language? What does this gender representation visually and linguistically contribute to the fight for women's rights and female liberation? Finally, are these modifications enough to advance the agenda of social justice, or do more actions need to be taken linguistically and in other facets to

ensure thorough equality? Through addressing all aspects of this debate, clarity about evolving university language can establish a foundation for understanding the inequity in German and create a common ground from which advancements in linguistic inequality can be made at more than just the university-level.

Gender Equitable Speech: Why?

In order for this debate to exist, there needs to be a shift from the norms of society that cause ripples of dissatisfaction. As aforementioned, German emphasizes the importance of three genders—masculine, feminine, and neutral—concerning declination of nouns, adjectives, and articles in various cases. This element of German is integral to its grammar; however, employing the generic masculine inhibits the expression of feminine and non-binary forms, demonstrating the effects of male-centric language on gender representation (Sato et. al. 679). This inhibition does have serious effects on the mental perception of groups since “...gender is a fundamental grammatical element that exerts an influence at different levels of language processing” (Sato et. al. 669). With this default, German carries a heavy bias in gender representation that many scholars and linguists seek to remedy by utilizing neutralized expressions.

Even though the longstanding traditional use of generic masculine appears natural, the bias to favor masculine forms in German has only increased and poses a serious linguistic threat to women “...because it is a relatively subtle means of conveying information about women...” (Sczesny et. al. 944). The use of masculine forms as the standard form of address creates in the workplace a lesser sense of belonging for females, lower levels of motivation, and has affected court cases that negatively impact women (944). Since “...masculine generics trigger the lowest or slowest cognitive inclusion of women, whereas alternative generics lead to a higher or faster

cognitive representation of women,” there lies the necessity to push for equality for women in another aspect of life: linguistically (De Backer and De Cuypere 254). In order to decrease gender-based inequalities, women’s representation must be increased in the regular constructs of the German language.

Another motivation for growing and actively utilizing gender neutral speech resides in a simple, human desire: progress. Stripping systems of their biases, prejudice, and discrimination moves society one step closer to equality, and this typically requires citizens to readdress traditions and norms that appear benign because of their long existence but have instead formed deeply ingrained habits in people that are difficult to reverse without constant recognition of their power over human action. Albeit arduous, these habits in the German language—like the generic masculine forms—can change. Promising results from a study seeking to understand how people use gender-inclusive speech show that participants were more likely to employ the usage of gender-inclusive speech whenever they “...had used it frequently in the past and thus had formed language-use habits” (Sczesny et. al. 948). The outcome of their first study showed that “...participants used gender-inclusive language partially in a mindless way and partially by making deliberate decisions” (Sczesny et. al. 948).

Echoing the outcomes of study one, study two revealed similar results that participants “...used gender-inclusive language to the extent that they explicitly formed intentions to do so and (marginally) to the extent that they had repeatedly, habitually done so in the past” (Sczesny et. al. 951). Therefore, when there exists a motivation and level of habituation, individuals are more likely to use gender-inclusive language, demonstrating the ability of people to overcome long standing, linguistic traditions and opt for versions of speech that contain adequate

representation. Nevertheless, there were individuals within both studies who “...endorsed...sexism...” and therefore “...failed to use gender-inclusive language because of their negative attitudes toward using it along with their intentions not to use it” (Sczesny et. al. 952). This point illustrates that language is a conscious action, and to create an equitable form of speech, ideas about sexism or any other -ism must be tackled in conjunction to develop a greater understanding of the impacts of prejudice and discrimination on those targeted.

The aforementioned motivations for altering German are derived from the study interests and findings of researchers; however, there exists a vast array of discourses calling for the same type of action from the public and various German media outlets. The focus of these online publications centers around the main issue for native and non-native speakers of German: the forms proposed are difficult to pronounce and quite inconvenient for speakers. A linguist at the Freie Universität Berlin, Anatol Stefanowitsch, asserts that the longer language variations are a simple obstacle to overcome because of their own ability to differ based on context. Furthermore, Stefanowitsch argues against inconvenience by comparing language habits—defaulting to the generic masculine form—to another poor habit: smoking. With persistence and accountability, an individual can quit cigarettes, and utilizing those same traits, one can additionally avoid generic masculine forms, substituting them for healthier habits—gender neutral variations. Concluding his argument, he recognizes that instituting any type of law or regulation for this speech would be detrimental because a myriad of forms for neutralizing speech are available, implying that speakers should get creative with their speech (Krüger).

Another motivation to alter these generic masculine forms arises from the general public’s disposition, which reflects a growing sentiment that favors these neutral expressions.

Oltermann cites an opinion from a prominent feminist linguist, Lusie Pusch, who claims that society will generally become jaded with articles and evolve like English during the Middle Ages to “...gradually simplify its gender articles.” Furthermore, forms of gender neutral German already exist, such as *Niederdeutsch*, which refers to both men and women as *de* (Oltermann). Therefore, a major motivation for establishing widely-used gender neutral language is simply that the call for the German language’s reform has been made, and with the augmenting public opinion, generic masculine’s avoidance becomes inevitable.

Referencing these research studies and online publications does not completely address all the motivations for having gender equitable speech; however, their arguments for reformation cannot be understated. Employing the generic masculine form creates male-favored bias, reduces the representation of women in speech, and altogether limits the progression of women’s equality in Germany. If the goal for German society is the equalizing of men and women, then the issues in linguistic inequality must be understood, dissected, and altered. This section depicts the evidence that contextualizes the ongoing debate about neutralizing German and prompts the breakdown of one of the main sources of variations of gender neutral speech—Lann Hornscheidt and the AG Feminist Language Action’s brochure—causing the conservative backlash later discussed in the paper.

The Brochure: Motivations for Publication

Published in 2014, “Was tun? Sprachhandeln-aber wie? W_ortungen statt Tatenlosigkeit!”, created by Lann Hornscheidt and the AG Feminist Language Action at Humbolt Univerisity, presents a future vision for anti-discriminatory language that seeks to involve all persons by accurately addressing all of their identities linguistically. With over fifty

pages of information, this brochure explicitly outlines the motivations for altering language, examples of inclusive speech—dependent on the specific situation—and rebuttals for the argument that these forms are unnecessary and irrelevant. Serving as simply a suggestion and possible future implementation, this brochure elicited many negative responses, which, in order to argue against the new language proposals, removed portions of the brochure out of context and attacked its linguistic construction, altogether muddying the original purpose of the brochure. Therefore, a complete dissection of the AG Feminist Language Action’s pamphlet yields a greater understanding of its contents, providing a foundation for how and why language can change.

The first section “*Sprachhandlungen und Veränderungen*” focuses mainly on the motivations for undertaking establishing anti-discriminatory German constructs, based on analyzing how German creates and reinforces systems of power and oppression. The inspiration for this text originates from the desire to constantly improve language, so that better allies can be made and people are named in a manner that is suitable to the gender, sex, etc. (4). Viewing the issue as both a personal and public quest for proper address, one must continuously ask: “In what situations am I privileged? In which situations do I experience discrimination?” These reflective questions aid in the never-ending learning process that is linguistics, implying that language’s constant evolution requires speakers to innovate new forms of communication (5). The section concludes by stating the brochure’s purpose, which is to orient itself in the social context of Germany, taking into account forms of discrimination, and provide linguistic possibilities and concepts that encompass inclusivity.

After a general overview of the brochure, its inspiration, and goal, the second section entitled “*Was ist Sprach bzw. was sind Sprachhandlungen?*” dissects how language serves as more than merely a form of communication—it establishes norms and therefore causes action. Using the phrase “the blind worker” to speak of a certain colleague constructs the image of a standard worker through the characteristics that are not named, thus concluding that a normal worker would have functioning eyesight (6). By naming qualities and choosing to not name qualities, mental schema are constructed, and through associating certain characteristics with specific groups—women with emotionality, men with beards, etc.—language no longer behaves in a neutral fashion (6). It begins to regulate societal norms concerning gender, sexuality, race, and other various identities. For that reason alone, linguistics must be interrogated to discover its discrimination both implicitly and explicitly.

Building upon that notion, the third section “*Wie hängen Sprachhandlungen und Normierungen zusammen?*” summarizes the effects of discriminatory language, which reduces people to a single identity and reinforces norms such as the gender binary. If one is named as black or disabled, this named trait carries assumed, mostly negative stereotypes that can shade that person’s actual character in a biased manner (7). Furthermore, referring to a group of mixed genders with just a male form that forgets the existence of females creates a perceived image of that group where females are not visually or linguistically present (7-8). There are various levels of privilege that reside in language such as having a typically German name, not forcing the individual to have to explain his/her/their origins, language, or family history (8). These examples showcase the forms in which language constructs a set of accepted social norms that affect all speakers whether aware or not (8).

“*Welche Rolle spielen Benennungen und Nicht-Benennungen?*” focuses specifically on the effects of what is named and what is not in language (8). The concept becomes visible in the proposed example of public restrooms, which are clearly marked according to the gender binary. There exists branches within the gender-separated bathrooms according to ability status where typically there are two types of stalls: regular-sized stalls and larger stalls that accommodate those in wheelchairs. What the bathroom example shows is that something as simple as a toilet condenses a person into one identity: man, woman, or disabled. Therefore, the naming of a restroom based on ability creates a place where a person with a physical disability is no longer addressed according to the individual’s gender (8-9). This example illustrates the process of linguistic naming/non-naming, and why it serves as a means by which traditional norms are created.

Entitled “*Kann es Sexismus ohne Rassismus und Ableismus geben?*”, the fifth portion emphasises the importance of intersectionality. With the aforementioned section about bathrooms concerning ability, there resides another point—gender is an identity consistently interwoven with other identities. For that reason, one cannot simply isolate an individual factor for the cause of discrimination because a person is comprised of a plethora of identities, some visible, others not (10). Language contributes significantly to intersectionality and the establishment of social norms because people are able to classify and quantify others based on these created categories and criteria. These groupings and the characteristics that come with them make language a conscious decision and, as named in the brochure, an action. The next portion “*Warum gehen Sprachhandlungen immer Entscheidungen voraus?*” concerns itself with what qualities about an individual are recognized and what can they mean, such as “the woman”

versus “the young woman” versus “the young interesting woman” (10). Those descriptors are intrinsically decisions for the writer, and all writing symbolizes a series of decisions. Therefore, language has the power to change and mold itself into a vessel that speaks for the silenced and represents those who have been discriminated against. These linguistic decisions are equally as important as silence because the latter is ultimately a decision as well (11).

The final section in the “*Sprachhandlungen und Veränderungen*” portion of the brochure looks toward the future of modifying language with the title “*Wie verändere ich meine Sprachhandlungen?*”. In order to break down systems of oppression in language, activists and allies are essential to refute all attempts to propagate discrimination. Since language constantly evolves, speakers have a duty to invent new expressions and ideas that serve as better vehicles for inclusivity and equality in language. Because the perfect language ceases to exist, all should “...challenge, notice, [and] address...” the current constructs to pursue the type of language that reflects all speakers (12). The purpose of summarizing the first section of *Was tun? Sprachhandeln-aber wie? Wortungen statt Tatenlosigkeit!* serves as a means to understand the motivations the writers had because after assessing those, this sets the stage to discuss the disagreements concerning the proposed alterations to the German language and why these are incongruent with the actual modifications made at German universities.

The Brochure: the Major Source of Controversy

Spawning major backlash from linguistically conservative networks, Lann Hornscheidt and the AG Feminist Language Action’s brochure in the second portion of the text includes a detailed chart, showcasing all of the various proposed modifications to make the German pronoun *Student* more representative of all people; however, noted in the text before the chart is

an important statement that all of these proposals should be “...further developed”, and they are not at the end of creating and revising more variations that can better serve the population’s desires (13). Below lies the chart with the nine different forms that modify *Student* in both the singular and plural contexts, contains the personal and possessive pronouns, and the question word referring to the pronoun (13).

Sprachformen	Substantive Singular	Substantive Plural	Personal-pronomen	Possessiv-pronomen	Frage-pronomen	Vgl. Seite
x-Form	Studierx	Studierxs	x	xs	Wex?	17
-Form I	Studier	Studier**	*		We*?	17
Dynamischer Unterstrich	Stu_dentin	Stu_dentinnen	s_ier	ih_re	We_lche?	18
Wortstamm-Unterstrich	Stud_entin	Stud_entinnen	si_er	ihr_e	Welch_e?	19
*-Form II	Student*in	Student*innen	sie*er	ihre*seine	Welche*r?	20
Statischer Unterstrich	Student_in	Student_innen	sie_er	ihre_seine	Welche_r?	20
Generisches Femininum	Studentin	Studentinnen	sie	ihre	Welche?	21
a-Form	Mitarbeita	Mitarbeitas	sie	ihre	Welche?	22
Binnen-I	StudentIn	StudentInnen	sie	ihre ihrE	Welche? WelchE?	22
Zwei-Genderung	Studentin und Student	Studentinnen und Studenten	sie/er, si/er	ihre/seine	Welche? Wer?	22

At first glance, this chart does appear to be quite contrary to the traditional German language because of its integration of symbols and usage of atypical spelling. Understandably so, these proposals seem to an outsider like an attempt at subverting *Hochdeutsch*, and without contextualizing Lann Hornscheidt and the AG Feminist Language Action’s brochure and reading the information preceding and succeeding the chart, a case could be crafted against any institution of these modifications because of their resemblance to an attack on traditional German

language. The writers' intentions, however, were certainly not that. Outlined in the previous section, the brochure's goal is to actively target and remedy discrimination and prejudice that run rampant in speech, explicitly and implicitly. The rest of the 54-page brochure details the appropriate usage of each of these forms in various contexts: written, spoken, formal, informal, and in different spatial settings. Most importantly, the brochure emphasizes that these forms are merely suggestions and proposals for individuals seeking to create a more inclusive linguistic atmosphere, and, therefore, this chart is not and will not become a widespread legal implementation.

Without a thorough reading of this brochure or knowledge about non-binary people, linguistic inequity, and other social issues expressed through language, this chart appears frightening to those who do not understand the goal of the language modifications because of deviance from traditional German and integration of various signs and symbols. This publication prompted an avalanche of conservative backlash that actively targeted and labeled this brochure as "irritating" and "confusing" (Vehlewald). Since the brochure's publication originated from Humboldt University, and conservative authors began writing against its contents, this constructed a false narrative about what policies and proposals were actually being implemented at universities across Germany. Therefore, after establishing the call for gender equality linguistically and understanding the motivations and proposals constructed by the academics at Humboldt University, one can begin to summarize, analyze, and deconstruct the arguments that attack these proposals; following this, the actual implementations at six universities will be laid out.

The Argument Against Altering German Language

Inevitably, with the proposal of altering aspects of the German language, there comes a more conservative pushback that challenges these proposals, viewing them as a subversion of the standard constructs of German. Even though the argument assembled against the aforementioned proposals originates not from scholarship but instead online articles and the non-profit *Verein Deutsche Sprache*, there still remains significant substance to their critiques. Postings on *Bild*, *Focus*, and *Deutsche Welle* show that these critiques against the altering of the generic masculine influence a massive audience, and when not properly explained, they can ultimately construct a false image of the linguistic pursuit for equality occurring at universities in Germany. Therefore, due to the widespread influential nature of these outlets, their objections will be analyzed to develop a thorough understanding of the major conservative critiques.

A few months after the publication of *Was tun? Sprachhandeln-aber wie? W_ortungen statt Tatenlosigkeit!* various publications in tabloids emerged such as Hans-Jörg Vehlewald's article in *Bild*, entitled "So soll unsere Sprache entmännlicht werden". With prior knowledge of the linguistic debate at hand, a reader could easily come across his article and have an entirely skewed vision of Hornscheidt's intentions due to the organization of the article. Firstly, Vehlewald begins by pulling example sentences listed in the brochure and proceeds to attack their constructions, targeting specifically examples that modify "-er" endings, use symbols such as "@" and an underscore, and avoid gendering by utilizing an "x". Removing these constructs from the context of the brochure undercuts the mission of Hornscheidt entirely, creating a false image to the German public that their language is being sabotaged by a single university.

Furthermore, this article's organization suggests that the linguistic changes have been made and implemented. Vehlewald remarks that the mission of the confusing brochure is to

avoid discriminatory and marginalizing language, which is correct; however, the tone he uses sounds spiteful and harsh, stating, “...everywhere in life and especially at the university, people would be marginalized or forcibly taken in by carelessly discriminatory language.” Citing specifically the most experimental examples from the publication and then attacking them out of the brochure’s context creates confusion over whether or not these proposals have become accepted at the university or in other areas of society. At the conclusion of the article, he adds an unfinished sentence, informing the reader that these proposals have not been instituted even though throughout the whole article Vehlewald’s tone and diction suggest otherwise. Knowing that this article appears in a popular tabloid, a majority of German public would and should be critical of this article’s credibility and validity; however, with this issue being extremely personal for each German—their own language being at stake—any sort of biased or uncontextualized information can appear misleading.

Similar in organizational structure, the article “Gender-Wahnsinn! So will eine Berliner Uni unsere Sprache verunstalten” published in *Focus* attacks the brochure by selecting less mainstream examples and continually emphasizing with a level of sarcasm how these forms are not anti-discriminatory enough. Without an author associated with the publication, the article lacks any degree of credibility; however, the notoriety of the media website allows for the content to be absorbed by a general, German public, causing the false image of Humboldt’s brochure to augment. Referencing the “a-Form”, “@”, generic feminine, and “x-Form”, the article facilitates discussion about the brochure under the illusion that these forms will be instituted at universities and seek to subvert the German language. In addition, the article heavily implies that the academics who published this brochure and their intentions in doing so cannot be

taken seriously, which seems accurate when the most extreme examples are removed from the context of the brochure. Once again, without a credible author listed, this article lacks the evidence and scholarly review to pose a sincere counter-argument to Humboldt's brochure, but that analysis fails to address its effects on a public audience: With the ubiquity of out-of-context examples pulled from the brochure, there begins an inadequate assessment about what types of methods universities are employing to combat gender-based discrimination.

Furthermore, this is not the only article at *Focus* that contains material directly attacking the brochure. Two other online publications—"Dieser kranke Wahnsinn ist keine Gleichberechtigung" and "Sprach-Experten lachen über 'Mitarbeita' und 'Doktoxs'"—heavily critique Hornscheidt's proposals by inviting frequent users to engage in the debate. Comparing the proposals to "gender fascism" and a "delusion", the contributors to these articles display their own personal opinions without the support of any scholarly sources or arguments. Due to the contributors' lack of notoriety as experts on this subject, their claims hold little to no credibility, but what they do contain is outrage. Outrage over the altering of German. Outrage over the questioning of gender. And outrage over the use of any sort of funding to change language.

This level of resentment towards Hornscheidt's brochure has the potential to shock readers into believing that these alterations are being instituted. Additionally there are over five contributors to these articles, signaling to an audience that this debate is larger in size and clearly controversial amongst readers. This integration of various *Focus* readers in and of itself establishes a certain level of shared credibility to the readers because they see some consensus and agreement on one side of this debate: these proposals seek to undermine the German language. Moreover, these articles are merely some of a few that circulate *Focus* and other media

outlets, which makes it appear that Hornscheidt's language proposals are outrageous, becoming widespread, and severely alter pronunciation.

Moving toward a more organized resistance against the alterations of German to pursue linguistic representation, *Verein Deutsche Sprache* that works to preserve the traditional German language with members all around the globe. Members holding credible titles and publications, the organizational structure of the non-profit, and the outreach they deploy through scholarships, debates, and events establishes this non-profit as a capable defender of the standard German language. Surfacing on March 6th, 2019, a petition circulated on VDS's website that calls for and end to the "gender nonsense" (Maron et. al.). The petition contains two main arguments against altering language: German has always been rooted in a linguistic tradition of masculine, feminine, and neutral, which has withstood for centuries, and the reference to the generic masculine has not inhibited women's ascent to power, citing Angela Merkel. Because of these two factors, alterations to German are excessive, unnecessary, unsustainable, and do not promote the advancement of women in society.

Firstly, the petition looks at three nouns as representative of arbitrary nature of giving nouns a gender: *der Löwe*, *die Giraffe*, and *das Pferd*—lion, giraffe, and horse (Maron et. al.). Even though the lion is not always male, the a giraffe is not always feminine, and horses have a particular sex, the petition argues that this type of assignment of gender demonstrates that there is no rhyme or reason for the attribution of gender in German. Along that line of rationale, it can be inferred that there exist no detrimental effects to employing the use of the generic masculine. Modifying German's gender-based system of nouns does not serve a purpose when those nouns' genders do not communicate anything more than grammatical behavior in a sentence.

To illustrate this point, the petition references Angela Merkel's position as Federal Chancellor of Germany. Since advocates for altering German assert that utilizing primarily the generic masculine stunts the growth of women's rights linguistically, the petition cites the role of Angela Merkel in German society. She currently serves as Federal Chancellor, and even though the law refers to the role as *Bundeskanzler*, which is the masculine form, this did not impede her ascent to power as German's primary leader; therefore, the language itself and its employment of generic masculine does not inhibit female rights. Compounding that logic, there would be no need to alter German since women are in positions of authority with the generic masculine's common usage (Maron et. al.).

With over 75,000 signatures, the petition holds a certain level of credibility since such a large number of people have all agreed that this type of alteration to German's gender structure is unnecessary. Furthermore, due to the fact that the website lists the signatures of the petition, the myriad of people with professional titles in all different fields from around Germany and all around the world add more validity to the claim and enhance its credibility. However, there are some elements to the petition that leave room for skepticism. Since the petition is available through an online medium, the authenticity of the signatures appears questionable, leaving those viewing the petition to ask if those names attached to the document have been verified and confirmed as individuals who support this cause. Even with these drawbacks to the petition's validity, to an outsider, this petition and the entire non-profit organization *Verein Deutsche Sprache* augments the debate surrounding the gendering system in German.

With the general confusion provoked by the tabloid articles and the existence of this type of language-preservation group, a thorough analysis of a few universities that have implemented

anti-discriminatory language will aid in clearing up any misunderstandings circulating this topic. Alterations to the generic masculine are occurring at German universities, and it remains important to analyze them to understand how German universities are actually utilizing gender neutral speech to discourage expansion of misinformation. Therefore, having contextualized this debate, the following section will analyze how six universities across Germany—*Humboldt Universität, Technische Universität München, Ludwigs-Maximilians Universität München, Freie Universität Berlin, Universität zu Köln, and Karlsruher Institut für Technologie*—institute gender-equitable linguistic practices in the university atmosphere, specifically looking at their online guidelines, handbooks, and websites to gauge the universities' sentiments. These six universities can be compared and contrasted to establish a general framework and foundation for gender-neutral speech to generate a more informed assessment of current university speech.

Six German Universities: What does Gender-Equitable Language Look Like? And Methodology

To broadly understand the university-speech in Germany would require rigorous surveying, interviewing, and interacting at campuses all around the country, controlling for variables such as location, school size, and student demographics; even with all of that research, it would still be difficult to adequately assess the true impact and utilization of gender neutral expressions and phrases by the professors and students. Therefore, the shortcomings of this research must be noted. This next section highlights the case studies of six major universities in Germany, selected on the basis of country-wide performance and general acclaim as prestigious universities and will focus on the accessible materials for the public, which are flyers, brochures, and pages on the universities' websites.

These materials will be thoroughly described for context and then coded for similar trends across all six institutions. The differences and commonalities will be utilized to construct a set of criteria that a university must adhere to in order to adequately respond to gender representation issues both linguistically and visually. These descriptive case studies' purpose serves two roles: They will provide a reasonable framework for the online response to gender issues occurring at six major universities in Germany, and they will additionally serve as a response to the arguments noted earlier that claim that academic institutions are sabotaging the German language. Through these descriptions and analysis, a greater understanding of the actual practices in German universities will emerge that can better diagnose the current state of the gender language debate in Germany.

Humboldt University

Beginning the analysis of university-language where the controversy originated, Humboldt University (*Humboldt Universität*) features a web page under their online services and style guide that highlights *Geschlechtergerechte Sprache*, which is “Gender-appropriate language” (“Geschlechtergerechte Sprache”). This single page asserts that language should equally recognize both genders and references both the university’s and Berlin’s constitutions, in which they legally require the recognition of both males and females in speech. Furthermore, the page offers five methods to modify language—double form, present participle, abstraction, synonym, and verb forms—and emphasizes that the modified language should be easy to read and barrier-free, Humboldt University additionally advises that the *-Innen* form not be utilized on website because of its possible confusion as a different letter (“Geschlechtergerechte Sprache”).

This single page of information severely contrasts the 54-page brochure from professor Lann Hornscheidt and the AG Feminist Language Action and paints a very different portrait of the university. Since there exist only two real criteria for Humboldt's inclusion of both genders—the equal addressing of both females and males and the avoidance of *-Innen* forms online—the university is far from instituting the proposals created by Hornscheidt. The usage of the two constitutions from the university and Berlin's administration frames the issue as something the university must follow due to the legal ramifications, and moreover, Humboldt's website about gender representation has not formally been updated since 2015.

Technical University of Munich

Within the Technical University of Munich's (TUM) website, there exists a page devoted solely to appropriate gender representation both in language and in visual mediums. They affirm that their motivations for adopting this type of speech is so that every person at TUM feels welcome to study and research, claiming that stereotypes should be avoided. Below the mission statement, seven scenarios are given in which lies an opportunity to utilize gender neutral language: "Individual Forms", "Female and Male Forms", "Gender Neutral Forms", "Visibility of all Genders", "Reformulation or Avoidance of Gender Forms", "Functional and Institutional Names", and a "Checklist". Under each of these subheadings, clarification of the concept is given and a few examples in addition, and specifically of interest is the "Checklist" subheading, which provides questions for students, faculty, and others to ask themselves to ensure the removal of gendered language. This type of self-reflection on language, stereotypes, and equality

provides a solid framework for approaching how to avoid and edit gendering in written and oral manuscripts (“Gendergerechte Sprache und bildliche Darstellung”).

At the conclusion, TUM cites all literature that was referenced in the formulation of this webpage, which gives readers a chance to explore other motivations for having gender equitable language. Furthermore, TUM supplies viewers with two separate resources to pursue inquiry into this topic: a link to a gender dictionary that gives options for modifying language and a link to page on the Goethe University of Frankfurt that comments on the importance of reducing homogeneity in visual representation of the university (“Gendergerechte Sprache und bildliche Darstellung”). This website, while lacking any legal sources for altering language, provides viewers with an adequate amount of background knowledge, examples, and resources if the ones presented do not satisfy a reader’s interest. However, TUM does not clarify who should use this language—administration, professors, students, etc.—and if it is required in all university spaces or only specific programs. Due to this absence of clarity, this website page lacks a general direction and enforcement.

Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich

Housed under a gender and diversity tab, the information regarding gender equitable speech on Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich’s (LMU) website outlines the possibilities for utilizing gender appropriate speech and encourages users to get creative. Underneath this mission statement, a myriad of links appear that connect viewers to places on the website where certain topics and suggestions for gender appropriate speech reside. Contextualizing the situation, LMU recognizes that the generic masculine forms do not involve women and therefore, must be actively reconstructed to contain gender symmetry, emphasizing that these

reconstructions are not cumbersome but instead require creativity. After this further elaboration of LMU's mission toward addressing gender inequality, the following sections cover content ranging from avoiding stereotypes to pair-forms to expressions that express neutrality (“Leitfaden gendergerechte Sprache”).

In order to make this alteration of language easier for newcomers, the website provides descriptive sections that compare two texts—one that lacks equal gender representation and a revised version that either is neutral or has equal gender representation. Using this type of comparison supplies viewers with a better understanding of how language previously and traditionally lacked symmetrical representation of both females and males and gives students, faculty, and outsiders of LMU the freedom to manipulate the language according to their own wishes. Furthermore, LMU provides a downloadable flyer that contains all of the information available on the webpage, so it can easily be distributed via paper or email (Die Frauenbeauftragte der LMU). With clear intentions for the usage of gender appropriate language and understandable examples, LMU prepares adequately for a transition to this type of language, so that all members of the LMU community belong both socially and linguistically. Since there are no legal parameters stated for gender appropriate language, this allows a level of flexibility for users to employ whichever expressions are most comfortable and applicable based on pronunciation, situation, and medium.

Free University of Berlin

The university's web page lists a specific department for women representatives, which houses the guidelines for creating gender appropriate speech. Two sections on the page outline the motivations for having gender appropriate speech, what it truly means, and where this type of

speech should be used. The language used to describe the function of language as “*kein neutrales Werkzeug*” (not a neutral tool) parallels the language used in Hornscheidt’s brochure and reflects similar motivations for having this type of speech (“Leitfaden für geschlechtergerechte Sprache”). Furthermore, the website references the erasure of the generic masculine and its avoidance because it creates “...[ein] Bild von der Universität, in dem Frauen als Professorinnen, Studentinnen und Mitarbeiterinnen nicht präsent sind” (an image of the university, in which women, female professors/colleagues, female students, and female employees are not present) (“Leitfaden für geschlechtergerechte Sprache”). With these goals and clear motivations outlined in the first paragraph of the webpage, Free University of Berlin constructs a detailed image to students, faculty, and prospective enrollees that this is a university that is working toward gender equality both linguistically and visually.

In the next section, the university addresses that texts must reflect an equal representation of both females and males. This representation must also remain untainted by stereotypes of either group because it helps all members of the university and even those not directly connected with the university better identify with the school and potentially attend and/or remain enrolled because of the climate of representation. As of right now, the university does not have the distinctive guidelines available because they are currently being edited for publication, but, nonetheless, the university offers a flyer—created by the women’s representatives—that provides options for creating gender sensitive speech (“Leitfaden für geschlechtergerechte Sprache”).

Reaching down to pull the “e” out of “gender”, a hand graces the front of the flyer, while the second page depicts a mouth coupled by a hand, exclaiming three gender sensible forms:

“Mitarbeiter*innen StudentInnen Professor_innen” (Zentrale Frauenbeauftragte der Freien Universität Berlin). Within the flyer, the motivations and rationale for gender appropriate language are outlined, and furthermore, the flyer gives a plethora of examples to formulate sensitive language, providing a regular form and its subsequent improved form. There is a guide for reformulation of language, short forms, and removing stereotypes from language such as “*Mannschaft*” (team), which directly references a male individual to a form like “*Team, Gruppe*” (team, group), which carry no gender bias (Zentrale Frauenbeauftragte der Freien Universität Berlin). Supplying readers with over twelve possible variations of language, this flyer outlines linguistic opportunities for all sorts of address, ranging from spoken to written to visual.

University of Cologne

Nestled amongst a myriad of other resources, the University of Cologne’s diversity and equal opportunity offices present their approach to gender appropriate language by beginning with quote from the North Rhine-Westphalia's *State Opportunity Act* that asserts both males and females should be linguistically recognized and gender neutral forms should also be used (“Gendersensible Sprache”). After this quotation, the University of Cologne links its own materials for university staff to create gender sensitive language according to these guidelines. This resource’s contents will be discussed further; however, after the link, the University of Cologne provides another assistance to students that has not appeared on any other university website page: the ability for student’s own gender recognition as male, female, or gender diverse. This type of selection is then sent to administrators and faculty who must adhere to the student’s gender identity appropriately in all forms of address (“Gendersensible Sprache”).

The rest of the webpage is devoted to scientific research that centers on the effects of the generic masculine and the effects of equal linguistic representation on children and other populations. The page summarizes a study that showed if children were presented with both gender forms of a stereotypically male profession such as engineer, they saw the job as more accessible. Additionally, the University of Cologne cites a study that showed respondents preferred gender neutral terminology in legal cases (“Gendersensible Sprache”). These references to academic works on gender representation validate all of the claims and guidelines that the University of Cologne makes because they show readers the true and real effects of gender representation in not only just the classroom but areas far beyond that.

The aforementioned resource depicts guidelines for faculty and administration who must adhere to the gender neutral and equal forms of address in a 32-page document. Firstly, the motivations for this type of speech are covered, and then the document reviews what gender sensitive language and how language can be constructed to reflect equal, appropriate representation of both males and females. The document even references how English can be utilized for gender equitable representation and concludes by reviewing counter arguments to gender sensitive speech and refutes them (Die Gleichstellungsbeauftragte der Universität zu Köln). Even though this handbook dives much deeper into the realm of gender sensitive speech, it nevertheless serves to show that the University of Cologne institutes real, obtainable measures for students and faculty to employ speech that represents the entirety of the population.

Karlsruher Institute for Technology

Housed under the diversity page, Karlsruher Institute for Technology (KIT) has an entire section devoted to the effects of gender awareness and competence. Firstly, there is a definition

of *Gendersensibilisierung*, which emphasizes that working toward equal opportunities for both males and females requires a systemic understanding and reflection of the different life situations of both genders (“Gender-Kompetenz durch Gendersensibilisierung”). With that broad recognition of the various struggles and opportunities both genders face, KIT furthers this by noting that scientific, research-based schools have often produced and propagated stereotypes about women and men’s roles, and therefore, KIT needs to halt the production of these harmful stereotypes because they are incorrect, inconsiderate, discriminatory, and hurt KIT’s diverse, academic environment.

Stating all of these core beliefs that KIT has transforms into real action as they commit to augmenting gender awareness by providing professional development and integrative events that solidify equal opportunities for men and women. Under the last subsection of the page, KIT supplies readers with another definition—*Genderkompetenz*. This is a complex understanding of the institution of gender, stereotypes, challenges of women/men, systems of discrimination, and various other social factors that shape individual experience in society and especially at institutions of education. Furthermore, on the side bars of the website, KIT provides three other resources for guidance on this topic: a video about intercultural *Genderkompetenz*, a document about *Gendersensibilisierung*, and finally a multi-page PDF that details how to ensure equal, appropriate gender representation and reduce stereotypes in visual media (“Gender-Kompetenz durch Gendersensibilisierung”).

With a comprehensive set of definitions, accessible resources, and mission statement, Karlsruher Institute for Technology presents as a academic institution that desires equal opportunities for women and men and a reduction of harmful, gender-based stereotypes and

discrimination. However, unlike other universities, KIT does not offer guidance on how to alter language to reflect this desire for equality amongst genders, highlighting instead how to improve visual representation of women in media. This begs furthering questioning: Is any university or institution doing enough to combat linguistic and visual inequity? What improvements could be made, and what do they mean for the greater goal of gender equality?

Trends and Interpretation

After analyzing these universities' guidelines to gender appropriate speech, there are several criteria that need to be met to have an active, prosperous commitment to gender representation in online spaces; these qualities are: a clear mission statement that outlines the university's motivations for employing gender representation, references to academic research that demonstrates the consequences of male-centered speech, understandable and applicable examples of gender-corrected texts, phrases, forms of address, etc., resources for further changing speech and increasing gender representation such as gender dictionaries and other school's resources, resources for combating stereotypes in visual mediums, and a flexible standard set for who should use these types of modifications when and where.

These six universities show a commitment at some level to furthering gender representation at higher institutions for females in linguistic manners and additionally visual. A commonality amongst them all is the appearance of some sort of mission statement. In this paper, the term "mission statement" means a clarification of the motivation(s) that a university would have to address the aspect of gender representation in speech/visual mediums. More or less, these mission statements are the "why" and the "for what reason" these universities decide

to have sections dedicated to gender and its function in academia. However, these mission statements differ in their content and application. Whether it be a direct citation of state constitutions as in the case of Humboldt University and the University of Cologne or a statement about acceptance and creating a campus culture where all can prosper, all of these six universities provide a semblance of a goal for why they support and employ a type of gender representative speech. This similarity across universities shows that they recognize that this is an issue that directly affects all members of the campus body as well as those seeking a place there, demonstrating that these academic institutions have a certain level of awareness of social issues and their appearance in linguistics.

Even though Humboldt University has a mission statement, the lack of resources, examples, and further rationale beyond the legal aspects noted in the constitutions shows that the online portrayal of this issue by the university is lacking in urgency and severity. Other sources frequently attempt to dispel gender stereotypes by increasing the representation of females visually in roles of leadership and STEM fields, but Humboldt's website does not include any references that show any attempt being made to combat this issue. The shortage of resources for administration, professors, and students to formulate their own gender neutral speech might be a symptom of the condition of the university's role in creating an inclusive environment, displaying the opportunity for Hornscheidt and the Feminist group to treat the problem by offering a variety of solutions. Humboldt University is an example of an academic institution that recognizes the issue at hand but has not committed to understanding the complexity of it, creating more aggressive university-guidelines, and displaying these efforts publically.

Having a mission statement, examples of appropriate speech, reference to literature on the topic, and other resources to intensify representation, TUM adheres to almost all of the criteria necessary to have adequate measures that promote gender representation. However, TUM lacks a clearly defined audience who should use this type of language or would be affected by it. Without a standard for when, where, and how gender appropriate language should be employed, there lacks any sort of flexible enforcement and adhere to both genders being recognized. Since TUM is a technical university, they are likely more well-versed in the stereotypes abundantly rampant about women in STEM fields. Because of this, TUM more than likely paid closer attention to promoting inclusivity for all people and could benefit even more with the inclusion of gender non-conforming forms of address.

The LMU website contains certain criteria such as a mission statement and resources for altering language that include a downloadable and distributable flyer, but LMU fails to recognize other elements of the gender representation debate. LMU does not touch on the visual aspects of gender stereotypes, include a target audience for this speech, and does not reference academic works that support these measures. While LMU has made a clear and concerned effort to address the prevalence of the inequity of gender representation, the lack of a comprehensive and targeted approach demonstrates an inadequacy of available solutions for students and professors to combat this issue.

With explicit rationale for employing gender appropriate speech, a clear group of individuals who should use it, sample materials under construction, and a temporary flyer that examines a multitude of options for reformulating speech, the Free University of Berlin supplies readers—both inside and outside of the university—with adequate context and guides to make a

transition to gender equal speech all across the campus run much more smoothly. Furthermore, the website implies that more information will soon become available for users, which will magnify the scope of their solution to unequal gender representation. However, this university lacks any established guidelines for combating visual stereotypes and appropriate visual representation for both genders.

Taking a comprehensive approach, the University of Cologne meets practically all of the markers for appropriate gender representation including novel practices. With a targeted audience, ample resources for altering language, references to scientific research related to this topic, and even alterations of language in English, this university is only lacking in one aspect: visual representation. However, it should be noted that the University of Cologne ticks off another box—they allow students to identify not according to the gender binary, and professors must strictly adhere to forms of address that correctly identify students. This rule adds a whole other layer to the debate about gender representation and will likely appear more in the following years as universities modify their guidelines further.

While KIT provides plenty of resources on avoiding visual stereotypes and clear definitions of gender sensitivity, KIT fails to meet several of the criteria that qualify a university as doing an adequate job of increasing gender representation. Firstly, there is no reference to language and how to formulate it in such a way that males and females are appropriately addressed, which is the main focus of this research. However, with such detail to visual equality, KIT provides insight into other avenues through which universities can better campus climate for both genders that might have previously been overlooked as an issue needing a remedy.

At the basis of this debate lies the recognition of unequal language representation as a problem with real consequences that requires action. All the academic institutions in this research have identified this issue and have begun implementing measures to reduce the imbalance of gender representation. However, from this analysis, each one appears to lack a specific aspect—whether it be visual representation resources or a target audience for the measures—that would constitute a comprehensive approach to promoting equal gender representation linguistically and visually. This small scope of research shows that the backlash to Hornscheidt’s brochure is based on assumptions of what might be occurring at universities and is clearly false. Out of all six of the institutions analyzed, not one of them promoted or even suggested the use of symbols such as “@” or changing word morphology with “x” endings.

Within each university, there are resources and guidelines that ensure flexibility and creativity in modifying German language based on the context of the situation, and furthermore, not one of the universities or cited constitutions demands rigid, strict usage of certain gender balanced or neutral phrases, allowing freedom for speakers, which was one of the main concerns of writers in the conservative backlash to Hornscheidt’s brochure. Each university’s administrative approach to combating linguistic discrimination severely contradicts the setting the conservative writers depict in the tabloid articles and in the online petition. Other than the inclusion of both forms of titles, there additionally is no legal requirement that mandates forms that must be used in and outside of the classroom. Moreover, due to the availability of various forms of gender balancing the pronunciation of the language does not have to alter fundamentally, which is a main counter argument to female-inclusion. Lastly, it is important to note that the university-supplied academic research on gender representation directly refutes the

claims made by VDS that the generic masculine does not stop women—specifically Angela Merkel—from obtaining certain positions, showing that it does have a serious effect on children’s visualization of occupations. This window into German university culture demonstrates that Hornscheidt’s suggestions in their brochure vastly contrast the actual implementations occurring at six of Germany’s major institutions, countering the claims made by the conservative backlash.

Conclusion: The Impact on the Debate of Gender Appropriate Speech

Nevertheless, these inconsistencies in the academic institutional guidelines for gender equity in German are a symptom of the larger issue at hand and prompt the questions: Are institutions in Germany doing enough? What consequences do Germans face if this is not enough to adequately battle inequalities in gender representation? How can “enough” be measured, and who should measure it? Finally, how would and could German society change if it accepted linguistic and visual models that emphasize gender balance and/or gender neutrality? These questions pose a myriad of options for further research and demonstrate the necessity for a comprehensive deep dive into the intrinsic patriarchy in certain languages and the subsequent effects of the dominant masculine presence.

With the emergence of dialogue concerning different gender identity and identity not along the gender binary, universities in Germany and across the world will have to adopt more extensive measures to ensure the inclusion of all individuals. However, with the harsh backlash to employing feminine and neutral gender representation, this transition to including individuals

of differing gender identities in forms of address will require much more time and effort. Moreover, this research has uncovered the importance of not only linguistic equality but additionally visual medium's; with women appearing publicly as leaders, men as caretakers, and other non-stereotypical depictions, university staff, students, and visitors have the ability to see a world where individuals are not confined by gender roles or norms, pushing past the rigid mental schema intrinsic to present society.

Due to these emerging guidelines at universities, it is of the utmost importance to investigate the short and long term effects of these new gender guidelines for modification and enhancement. Language has always evolved, shaped by the culture, history, and location of its speakers; therefore, it is not beyond reason in the future to see a major overhaul in the German language that recognizes the effects of the generic masculine and adequately combats the pervasive patriarchy in German forms of address and other aspects, so that women and non-binary individuals' presence is appropriately reflected in the words they regularly use. Since language is one of the most basic and frequent forms of social interaction, language has immeasurable effects on speakers and therefore, is an ideal entry point for social intervention because if Germans can change the way they speak, they can change the way they think and eventually the way they see the world.

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