
Beyond economy: gendered language in German

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Gendered language forms – above all, nominal neo-forms as *Linguist*innen*, *Linguist:innen* or *Linguist_innen*, double-naming variants as *Linguisten* and *Linguistinnen* and “generic” feminines as *Linguistinnen* – can hardly be considered as economic when compared to the generically interpretable masculine *Linguisten*. Despite that, gendered forms have become quite popular. In my talk I will try to identify the reasons for that “triumph” and reflect on the supposed sustainability of innovative *-forms by analyzing (im-)possible uses from a theoretical perspective.

Due to their complexity, gendered *-forms feature many disadvantages, inter alia, their morpho-syntax causes severe processing problems (*Jede*r Professor*in lobt ihre*n*seine*n Studenten*in* ‘Every professor praises her/his student’), they bear incompatible affixes (*Studenten*_{acc.sg.masc}/*Studentin*_{acc.sg.fem}), and what’s more, they are semantically equivalent to generic masculines (Zifonun 2021, Trutkowski & Weiß to appear). Thus, it is obvious to assume that their use is (socio-)pragmatically driven: I hypothesise that they come along with a conventional implicature (Grice 1975/1989, Potts 2005), i.e., a speech act making use of gendered language can be understood as a performative act in which the speaker states that s/he is aware of the fact that the person(s) s/he is referring to can include people of any gender or sexual identity. Thus, gendered forms are not only honorific forms (which is one of the fields where conventional implicatures are found, cf. Potts 2005: 6), but also entail a selfish ‘awareness stance’ of the speaker.

Although speakers’ (often false) beliefs and dogmata about language play an important role in the debate on gendered language, the “survival” of the new forms will – so my hypothesis – largely depend on the *-forms’ scope of application: E.g., can they be used for word formation, can they be integrated in existing (or newly arranged) inflectional paradigms? etc. The more complex their phonological structure, the more difficult their morpho-syntactic integration, the less additional semantic value they add (and provide) and the more rare and limited their linguistic registers are, the less likely it is that innovative *-forms will replace generic masculines. I argue that *-forms will only persist if their conventional implicature is strong enough to outdo their uneconomic structure, so that the inconvenience associated with the production of neo-forms is (socio-)pragmatically “worth it”.

References: • Grice, P. (1989). *Studies in the Way of Words*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. • Potts, C. (2005). *The Logic of Conventional Implicatures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. • Trutkowski, E. & H. Weiß (to appear in *Linguistische Berichte*). Zeugen gesucht! Zur Geschichte des generischen Maskulinums im Deutschen. • Zifonun, G. (2021). Eine Linguistin denkt nach über den Genderstern. *Sprachreport* 37(2), 46–51.