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Shifting social norms as a driving force for linguistic change: Struggles about language and gender in the German Bundestag

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Shifting social norms as a driving force for linguistic change: Struggles about language and gender in the German Bundestag[1]

Carolin Müller-Spitzer & Samira Ochs

„Die Frauenrechtler mögen verzweifeln, aber es läßt sich nun einmal nicht ändern: die Sprache hält's mit dem Mann. Sie ist noch immer nicht emanzipiert."[2]
Karl Kraus (1912)

[1] We thank IDS colleagues Alexander Koplenig, Jan Oliver Rüdiger and Sascha Wolfer for fruitful discussions about research on gender-inclusive language. In addition to all of our appreciated colleagues in the field of gender linguistics, we would especially like to thank Luise Pusch for her pioneering and tireless work in the field, from which we particularly benefited in this article.

[2] 'The women's rights activists may despair, but it cannot be changed: the language keeps it with the man. It is still not emancipated.' Kraus, Karl 1912: Die Abgeordnete. In: Die Fackel, 14. Jg., Heft 351-353 S. 66 (https://fackel.oeaw.ac.at/F/351,066), In: AAC - Austrian Academy Corpus: AAC-FACKEL Online Version: „Die Fackel. Herausgeber: Karl Kraus, Wien 1899-1936" AAC Digital Edition No 1.

This paper focuses on language change based on shifting social norms, in particular with regard to the debate on language and gender. It is a recurring argument in this debate that language develops naturally and that severe interventions – such as gender-inclusive language is often claimed to be – are inappropriate and even dangerous. Such 'interventions' are, however, not unprecedented. Socially motivated processes of language change are neither unusual nor new. We focus on one important socio-political space in Germany, the German Bundestag. Taking other struggles about language, gender, and sexuality in the plenaries of the Bundestag as a starting point, our article illustrates that language and gender has been a recurring issue in the German Bundestag since the 1980s. We demonstrate how this is reflected in linguistic practices of the Bundestag, regarding a) the use of self-chosen designations for gays and lesbians; b) naming practices for women in political positions; and c) more gender-inclusive legal language. Lastly, we discuss implications of these earlier language battles for the currently very heated debate about gender-inclusive language, especially regarding new forms with gender symbols like the asterisk or the colon (*Lehrer*innen, Lehrer:innen* 'male*female teachers') which are intended to encompass all gender identities.

1 Introduction

Shifting social norms are a driving force for language change, in particular regarding the omnipresent social category of gender. In the debate about language and gender, a recurring argument is that the change towards more gender-inclusive language has nothing to do with 'natural' language change. New gender symbols,[3] e.g. the asterisk in *Wissenschaftler*innen* ('scientists'), are especially contested in this regard, being considered by some linguists "a private invention and an ugly thing that tears up words and deforms texts" (Eisenberg 2020: 9, own translation). They are often framed to be inventions, "aggressively offered by a small group to the majority of the population against their will", e.g. by academic circles or left-wing parties, and "have nothing to do with language change whatsoever […]" (Bayer 2019a, own translation, cf. also 2019b). This gives the impression that societal interven-

[3] In German (as in other languages), new ways to address non-binary people more explicitly have been developed by the language community in recent years. An option already well established in the language system is to use neutralisations such as epicene nouns or derivatives of adjectives and verbs in the plural. New forms are an extension of established feminisation strategies (pair forms *Lehrerinnen und Lehrer*, 'female and male teachers') with new gender symbols that are intended to explicitly include non-binary people (*Lehrer*innen*, *Lehrer:innen*, 'teachers'). The gender symbols are new orthographic symbols inserted between the masculine stem and the feminine suffix of personal nouns. These symbols work particularly well in the plural, because German noun phrase elements do not vary for gender in the plural, unlike in Italian or French, for example. Some qualitative studies have already found tendencies for less masculine generics and more gender-inclusive forms (cf. Adler & Plewnia 2019, Elmiger et al. 2017, Krome 2020). Quantitative studies on the use of these symbols are still scarce (e.g. Sökefeld 2021, Waldendorf 2023, Ochs & Rüdiger 2025).

tions into language, either on the public or on the political level, are unprecedented and not part of language as a living, constantly changing system. However, language change based on shifting social norms is neither unusual nor new, especially regarding social categories like gender and sexual orientation.

In our paper, we focus on political arenas in which language and gender is negotiated – more precisely, we discuss plenary protocols of the German Bundestag. The Bundestag is Germany's federal parliament and serves as the primary legislative body in the country's political system. Its members, elected by the German people every four years, represent the public and pass laws, set budgets, and make decisions on national issues such as selecting the Chancellor, who heads the government, and in overseeing government actions to ensure they adhere to democratic principles. The plenary debates are therefore at the core of German socio-political discourse and serve as an ideal basis to illustrate battles about gender and language in political realms. We mainly focus on tracing these historical battles and on relating them to the current debates about gender-inclusive language forms. In particular, we use these examples to demonstrate that social norms are inherently reflected in language, and that changes in these norms inevitably lead to changes in linguistic expression. This point is often overlooked in the current debate surrounding gender-inclusive language in German, where it is frequently denied that the negotiation of linguistic norms has always been a fundamental aspect of social interaction. Yet, these two dimensions—language and societal norms—are deeply interconnected, especially when it comes to naming practices for individuals. To enrich this discussion, we integrate findings from small-scale corpus analyses throughout the article.

In section 2, we discuss a language battle concerning the terms *schwul* ('gay') and *lesbisch* ('lesbian') in the German Bundestag. In section 3, we trace the slow development of gender-inclusive language forms in the Bundestag regarding naming practices for female delegates and gender-inclusive legal language. We explore implications of these past language struggles for current issues of gender-inclusive language in section 4, followed by concluding remarks in section 5.[4]

2 *Sprache der Gosse:* The reference to sexual orientations in the German Bundestag

The first language battle of the Bundestag that we discuss is not so much concerned with gender as with sexual orientation. However, as we will see below, these language disputes reveal patterns of behaviour that we can also see in debates about gender-inclusive language. In 1969, the criminal prosecution of lesbians and gays was abolished in Germany, and in 1990 the WHO officially decided that homosexuality was not a mental illness. In Germany, the infamous paragraph 175 was removed from the constitution only in 1994, whereby same-sex sexual acts were legally equated with heterosexual ones.[5] The German parliament discussed issues of homosexuality and legal equality in several stages and with several different agents at the core of

[4] Parts of the first two chapters have already been published in German in Müller-Spitzer (2022).

[5] For detailed insights into queer German history, see Gammerl (2023).

the debate.[6] On the linguistic level, which we focus on here, it is important to know that the words *schwul* and *lesbisch*, similar to English 'gay' and 'lesbian', had long been stigmatized. Their use to denote gay or lesbian people was often intended or understood to be defamatory and insulting. Traces of this could be found in German youth language, where *schwul* was typically used in a highly discriminatory and derogative way, for instance as a synonym for 'revoltingly bad' or 'unattractive'.[7] However, the lesbian and gay movement itself hijacked these words and used them to refer to themselves, so that today they are mostly used neutrally. This phenomenon of reappropriating pejorative terms can also be observed in other languages and lexical domains, "e.g. the word 'queen' to refer to an effeminate man" (Calder 2020: 2) in English.

We use an incident from the year 1988 in the German Bundestag to illustrate linguistic discussions around reappropriation and self-designation.[8] It was triggered by a number of linguistic battles that went to court in the late 1980s. In 1988, the *Feministische Frauengesundheitszentrum Berlin* ('Feminist Women's Health Centre Berlin') wanted to publish an advertisement containing the word *lesbisch.* The *Deutsche Postreklame GmbH* ('German Post Advertising Corporation') refused to print the ad, claiming that the word 'lesbians' went against good morals. The Centre's objection was dismissed by the Frankfurt Regional Court: Because of its "vulgar" choice of words, the text was claimed to be disrespectful towards "those women who, in their erotic sensibilities, are attracted to female partners" (Pusch 1994: 248, own translation); in other words, it would be discriminating against lesbian women.

With this ruling, the local court prioritized its own judgment of appropriateness over the self-declared interests of the feminist women's centre. Four MPs from the party *Die Grünen* ('The Greens', a green political party) used a *Kleine Anfrage* ('small request', a very condensed request addressed to the executive of the government) to bring this linguistic dispute to the attention of the Bundestag, i.e. to the national level. The MPs asked whether the federal government could use its influence to ensure that the advertisement was allowed to appear in Berlin, and whether the federal government was aware that lesbian support groups even have the word *lesbisch* in their name. The MPs also asked whether the federal government could guarantee "the right to self-designation in the sense of an emancipatory expression of opinion for gays and lesbians" (Pusch 1994: 249–250, own translation).

The President of the German Bundestag, Philipp Jenninger, then rejected the inclusion of the *Kleine Anfrage* because of its wording. He argued that the entire House would not accept the terms *Schwule* and *Lesben.* He would only include it in the agenda if *Homosexuelle und Lesbierinnen*[9] ('homosexuals and lesbians') were used. Similar to English, where the term 'homosexual' "had medical and pathologizing

6 For a detailed analysis, see Ebner (2018).

7 The Duden dictionary states that this use is old-fashioned and not really found anymore in today's youth language. However, the connotation remains and a derogative usage is still possible, although we do not have current data on the actual frequency and domain of use.

8 For more details see Pusch (1994).

9 An outdated term which refers to female inhabitants of Lesbos (https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/Lesbierin_Frau).

Figure 1: Still of Rita Süßmuth from the documentary "Die Unbeugsamen". Watch the clip here: https://journals.ub.uni-koeln.de/index.php/the_mouth/article/view/11964 (01:03:51-01:04:47; Copyright: Broadview Pictures; https://www.dieunbeugsamen-film.de/; 2020).

connotations" (Calder 2020: 2) and was slowly replaced with the positive term 'gay' by the in-group itself, the terms demanded by the President were considered pejorative and not accepted by the gay and lesbian community. The applicants replied that *Schwule* and *Lesben* were the freely chosen self-designations and that the proposed alternatives were neither appropriate nor acceptable. Annemarie Renger (SPD; 'Social Democratic Party of Germany', a centre-left social democratic political party)[10] was by then the new President of the Bundestag, which is why she answered the request. In her statement, she said:

> The terms 'gay and lesbian movement' may have passed over from colloquial to standard language in the meantime, but all members of the House still cannot accept them. Let me remind you that on September 29, 1988, the vast majority of the Council of Elders also voted against allowing the use of such terms (as cited in Pusch 1994: 253, own translation).

CSU ('Christian Social Union')[11] member Fritz Wittmann also stressed that the terms *Schwule* and *Lesben* were "Sprache der Gosse" ('vocabulary belonging to the gutter') and not worthy to be used within the parliament (Pusch 1994: 253).

The documentary film *Die Unbeugsamen* ('The Unbending') by Torsten Körner vividly shows how strong the everyday discrimination against gays still was at that time.[12] In the film (see Figure 1), CSU politician Hans Zehetmair, then Bavarian Minister of Education, asserts on a talk show that, in his view, homosexuality is "against nature" and "a pathological behavior." He argues that society should focus less on "better understanding the margins" and instead prioritize the "protection of the majority." According to Zehetmair, these "margins" should ultimately be "thinned out." Overt homophobia in political settings was still socially acceptable, and few politicians acted against this widespread attitude (e.g. CDU politician and former minister Rita Süssmuth; an interview with her is following the talk show with Hans Zehetmair).

This reluctance to discuss matters openly also manifests itself in the further development of the language battle in parliament. After

[10] Annemarie Renger was the world's first female president of a democratically elected parliament.

[11] Forms a centre-right, conservative political alliance with the CDU, the 'Christian Democratic Union'.

[12] For an overview on the history of gay and queer people within the Federal Republic of Germany, see Könne (2018) and Gammerl (2023).

the refusal to negotiate the request if it contained the terms *Schwule* and *Lesben*, the Green party switched from confrontational to subtle methods. They reformulated the request with the made-up self-designation *Urninge und Urninden* found in a book about "male-male love" from the 19th century (Ulrichs 1864). In the explanatory note, the authors wrote that they preferred to fall back on this antiquated, the terms *Schwule* and *Lesben*, giving the parliament the choice of accepting it as it was or, if rejected, publishing the rejection with the aim of maximum media coverage. The parliament then accepted the request in the submitted form, and since then the self-designations *Schwule* and *Lesben* are allowed to be included in the official negotiations and thus in the protocols (Pusch 1994: 258).

Deutscher Bundestag
11. Wahlperiode

Drucksache 11/3741

15. 12. 88

Antrag

der Abgeordneten Frau Oesterle-Schwerin, Frau Kelly, Frau Olms, Volmer, Dr. Daniels (Regensburg), Häfner, Kreuzeder, Frau Rust, Frau Saibold, Weiss (München) und der Fraktion DIE GRÜNEN

Beeinträchtigung der Menschen- und Bürgerrechte der britischen Urninge und Urninden durch die Section 28 des Local Government Bill sowie vergleichbare Angriffe auf die Emanzipation der Urninge und Urninden in Bayern

Figure 2: Excerpt from the protocol of the German Bundestag (December 15, 1988), containing the terms *Urninge* and *Urninden* (Deutscher Bundestag, Drucksache 11/3741: https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/11/037/1103741.pdf.)

made-up self-designation rather than to use the outsider designations *Homosexuelle und Lesbierinnen*.[13] This is how the motion was then actually negotiated (see Figure 2).

It was not until 1991 that the dispute was settled. The Greens tabled another request with

It is interesting that the rejection of the terms, as well as the court decision against them, are not openly directed against the linguistic-emancipatory efforts of the gay and lesbian movement. Rather, they are framed as protecting the gay and lesbian community, as

[13] Deutscher Bundestag, Drucksache 11/3741: https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/11/037/1103741.pdf; p.2.

it was assumed that a) the terms were pejorative *per se* and must be considered so also by the in-group, and that b) the politicians and judges as outsiders were more entitled to decide about the connotations and implications of the terms and therefore demand alternatives that they deemed more dignified.[14] A similar reliance on straw man arguments can be observed in today's debates on gender-inclusive language, which often sidestep an open exploration of the social norms underpinning linguistic negotiations (see section 4).

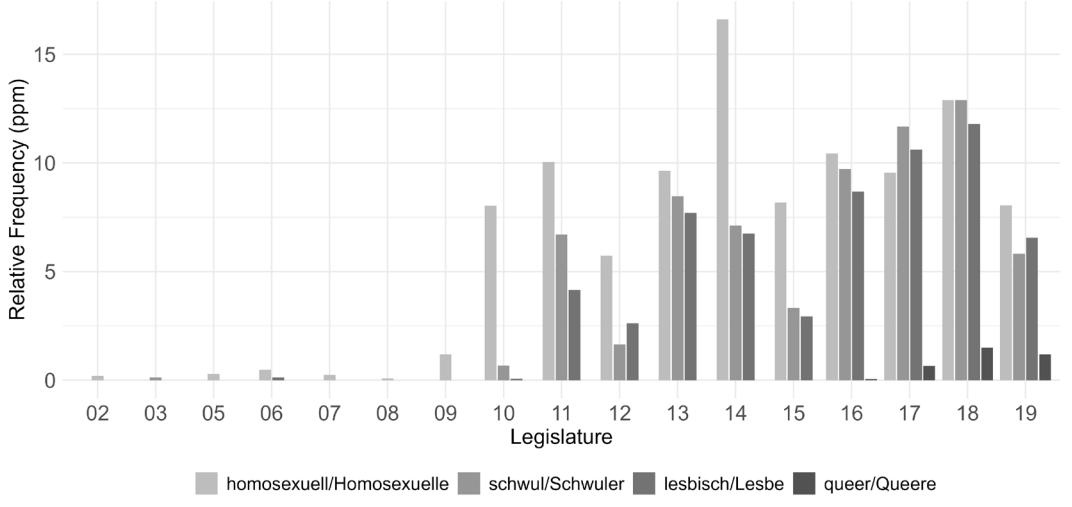

Figure 3: Relative frequencies of the adjectives *homosexuell, schwul, lesbisch, queer* and their nominal derivations in Bundestag protocols from 1953 to 2021.

We supplement these historical insights with our own analyses based on the corpus data of the German Bundestag plenaries. Figure 3 shows the distribution of the terms *homosexuell, schwul, lesbisch* and *queer* in the Bundestag protocols from the 2nd to the 19th legislature (from 1953 to 2021), which we extracted via regular expressions from the corpus of protocols of the German Bundestag (Müller & Stegmeier 2021). The topic of homosexuality is barely discussed at all before the 9th legislature (1980-1983), after which the term *homosexuell* is most prominent for several years. It is only in the 11th legislature (1987-1990), that *schwul* and *lesbisch* start to appear regularly in the protocols, most likely due to the discussions initiated and furthered by the Greens in 1988. From then on, the two terms appear nearly always in equal measure. This can be explained by the frequent use in pair forms, e.g. *schwule und lesbische Paare* ('gay and lesbian couples'), *lesbische Frauen und schwule Männer* ('lesbian women and gay men'), and *Schwule und Lesben* ('gays and lesbians'). The hypernym *homosexuell* remains the most frequent

[14] For moral aspects of using/not using self-designations, cf. Stefanowitsch 2018: 55–60; for sociological perspectives on self- vs. outsider-categorisation and the interactions between both, cf. Hirschauer (2021: 164–165).

realisation throughout the decades, and is less frequent than *lesbisch* and *schwul* only in the 17th legislature (2009-2013). This demonstrates that even though lesbian and gay communities chose *schwul* and *lesbisch* as self-designations, the use of the umbrella term *homosexuell*, to denote both, is typically dominant in the protocols. Contrary to English, where *gay* can be used as a synonym for *homosexual*, the term *schwul* in German is completely restricted to male homosexuals. Therefore, the existence and use of the underspecified hypernym *homosexuell* is still necessary in German (or, as another strategy, the use of both *schwul* and *lesbisch* in pair forms). In the 16th legislature (2005-2009), we see the emergence of the new umbrella term *queer*, an English loanword that comprises more than *homosexuell* (see Baker 2013). It is "a move beyond looking at dominant categories as homogenous identities towards a more inclusive understanding of non-normative sexuality [and gender identity]" (Jones 2021: 15). These conceptual changes go hand in hand with cultural frame shifts: "a sexual preference develops from the sin of sodomy to a medicalized concept of 'homosexuality', and then to a private lifestyle of same-sex romantic relationships with the option of an indiscriminate 'marriage for all'" (Hirschauer 2020: 329, own translation).

The parliamentary negotiations about language use and underlying social norms regarding sexuality show that those two dimensions are intrinsically intertwined. Several bigger questions arise from it: Who claims a voice and who listens to it? Who claims to know what is the appropriate term for a group? Who has the power to decide about these issues? These battles are often fought under false pretences: The real motives for rejecting the linguistic visibility of gay people were deliberately masked by using linguistic morals as a straw man argument. At the same time, we see that self-designations can be continuously changing. The linguistic community, consisting of in-group members and outsiders, is in a constant process of negotiating these terms, e.g. in the English-speaking world, where the explicit labelling of 'gay' and 'lesbian' is on the decline in favour of more inclusive and less categorical terms like 'queer' and 'LGBT' (Baker 2013, Jones 2021: 15).

3 Naming practices for women – a slow development towards more gender-inclusive language in the Bundestag

After focussing on queer self-designations and debates about them in the Bundestag in section 2, section 3 is dedicated to long-standing feminist emancipation efforts in politics. This is especially important regarding the pioneering role of feminist linguistic efforts for current debates about gender-inclusive language (see e.g. Lind & Nübling 2022, Müller-Spitzer 2021 and 2022, Simon 2022). We present three examples from the Bundestag to illustrate these efforts: The disputed use of the forms of address in the list of deputies (3.1), the use of feminised personal nouns when referring to individual women (3.2), and the use of pair forms to establish a more gender-inclusive legal language (3.3). Sections 3.2 and 3.3 are supplemented by our own corpus analyses.

3.1 *Frau* but not *Herr:* Feminine forms of address in the list of deputies

Our first example highlights the imbalance between practices of address for male and

female MPs. Deviations from a presumed norm tend to be marked linguistically. This has been discussed in the context of androcentrism, or 'male as norm' (MAN principle; see Bailey et al. 2019), which can manifest itself linguistically. Typical examples from German concern compounds like ***Frauen****fußball* or ***Frauen****mannschaft* ('women's football', 'women's team') as opposed to uncompounded *Fußball* or *Mannschaft* ('football', 'team'), which usually refer to male domains (see Kotthoff & Nübling 2018: 135, Pusch 1984: 98, 100–101, Trömel-Plötz 1978: 57). In few cases, we find 'female as norm', with the male being marked as the deviation, e.g. *Parfüm* 'perfume' vs. ***Herren****parfüm* 'gentlemen's perfume' (see Hornscheidt 2008 for a discussion on such deviations in Swedish). Other linguistic markings of deviations from supposed norms are found in racist terminologies ('white as norm' concepts, see Baker-Bell 2020), e.g. using 'white' and 'coloured' in direct opposition, or the German word *hautfarben* 'skin coloured' with light skin types as the default.

Liste der entschuldigten Abgeordneten

Abgeordnete(r)	entschuldigt bis einschließlich
Dr. Ahrens*	29. 9.
Baum	30. 9.
Frau Beer	30. 9.
Dr. Biedenkopf	30. 9.
Biehle	30. 9.
Büchner (Speyer) *	28. 9.
Carstensen (Nordstrand)	30. 9.
Frau Dr. Däubler-Gmelin	30. 9.
Frau Dempwolf	30. 9.
Ehrbar	30. 9.

Figure 4: Excerpt from the list of deputies of the German Bundestag from 1988 (Deutscher Bundestag, Plenarprotokoll 11/96, p. 6565, https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/11/11096.pdf). Female MPs had *Frau* added to their names.

The Bundestag protocols are another example of how deviations from the 'male as norm' principle were marked linguistically. In the name lists of the plenary protocols, the address *Frau* ('Ms') was added to the names of female deputies. For male deputies, only the surnames were listed.[15] Figure 4 shows how the Bundestag name lists then looked like (see also Fig. 2, where the female deputies who were present at the plenary session are listed with *Frau*).

It was not until 1991 that this practice was abandoned, but not without much debate. In 1987, for example, Marliese Dobberthien (SPD) criticised the exclusive use of the feminine form of address in Bundestag protocols:

> All print matter of the Bundestag also contains completely unnecessary gender-specific formulations in which men are the standard, the norm, but women are only the exception to which special attention must be paid. In registers, for example: Why don't we put a *Herr* in front of the male deputies? Don't our men deserve a little more courtesy?[16]

The first women in the Bundestag were exceptional in the political arena, and this exceptionality was highlighted linguistically. It was only 30 years ago that the gender-specifying form of address and thereby the linguistic excep-

[15] Research shows that men are more often referred to by last name only, whereas first and last name or the address *Frau* tend to be used for women; see Ochs (2024: 34), Bühlmann (2002: 185); for English, see Atir & Ferguson (2018), McConnell-Ginet (2003).

[16] Own translation, Deutscher Bundestag, Plenarprotokoll 11/37, p. 2503, https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/11/11037.pdf

tionality of women was removed from the protocols.

3.2 *Frau Präsident* or *Frau Präsidentin?* Feminisation of personal nouns

Our second example focuses on the use of masculine vs. feminised personal nouns for female referents. According to Hellinger and Bußmann (2003: 150–160), when referring to persons in German, we can distinguish personal nouns that specify referential gender by grammatical, lexical, or morphological means. We are only interested in the most prominent process when it comes to the linguistic representation of women: the derivation of feminine forms from a masculine base, usually realised with the suffix *-in* (e.g. *Minister*/*Ministerin*, 'male/female minister'; *Präsident*/*Präsidentin*, 'male/female president'). These are semantic minimal pairs as they have the opposing semantic features *+male/-female* and *+female/-male* (Diewald 2018: 290–293). Within these semantic minimal pairs, the masculine form typically serves two functions: first, as a marker for masculine-specific reference, and second, as a so-called 'masculine generic'. This term describes the use of the masculine form to denote a group of individuals whose gender is either unknown, irrelevant, or disregarded. For instance, *Wissenschaftler* [m.pl.] ('scientists') may refer to a mixed or unspecified group of scientists (Hellinger & Bußmann 2001).

Masculine generics are the main point of dispute in current debates about gender-inclusive language, as psycholinguistic evidence suggests that the masculine form evokes a male bias, meaning that masculine generics are probably not the most inclusive form of person reference (see for example Gabriel et al. 2008, Gygax et al. 2008, Körner et al. 2022, Zacharski & Ferstl 2023). Besides that, it is unusual to use the masculine form to refer to an individual woman in German. Singular specific expressions, especially direct addresses, are highly referential, leading to the expectation that the grammatical gender reflects referent gender: a masculine singular indicates a male individual, a feminine singular indicates a female individual (Kotthoff & Nübling 2018: 93). Becker (2008: 66) even calls female-referring masculines a "lie", e.g. if meeting with a female colleague was announced by the utterance *Heute Abend gehe ich mit einem Kollegen [m.sg.] zum Essen* ('Tonight I'll have dinner with a [male] colleague').

In actual language use, however, we find instances in which the masculine is used to refer to specific women, e.g. in compounds with highly referential first elements (Ochs 2024: 30). We also find examples of this in the Bundestag protocols, relating directly to feminist efforts of female visibility. When Annemarie Renger was the first woman to be elected president of the Bundestag in 1972, the Senior President addressed her as *Frau Präsident* (masculine form of 'president')[17] in his congratulations. Other female ministers were also addressed with the male form, e.g. Katharina Focke (SPD, term of office: 1972-1976): *Focke, Minister für Jugend, Familie und Gesundheit* ('Focke, Minister [m.sg.] for Youth, Family and Health'). This practice continued until the end of the 1980s, even though debates were hinting at a coming change: deputies started protesting with interjections

[17] Deutscher Bundestag, 1. Sitzung, 13. Dezember 1972, S. 3, https://dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btp/07/07001.pdf

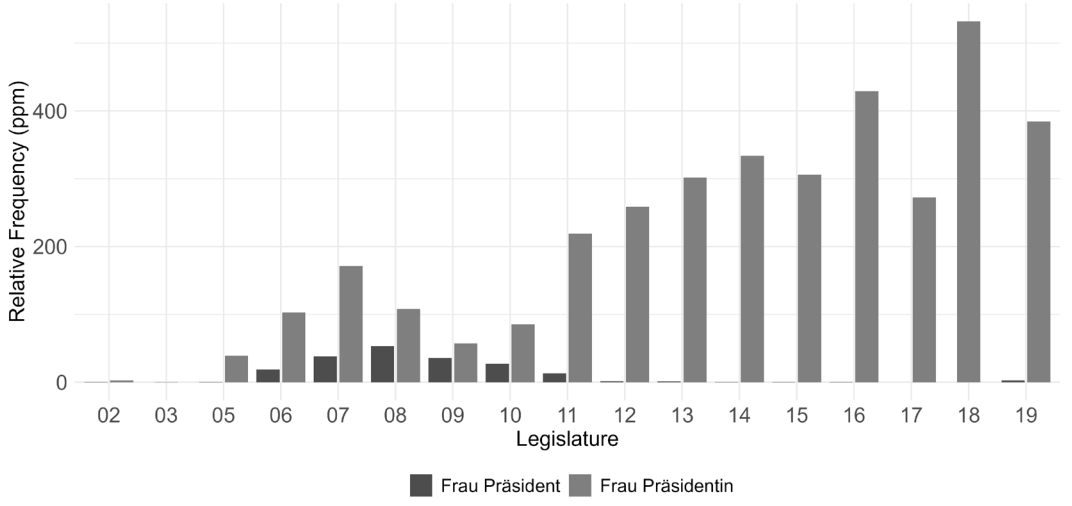

Figure 5: Relative frequencies of the addresses *Frau Präsident* and *Frau Präsidentin* in Bundestag protocols from 1953 to 2021.

when the masculine form was used to refer to a woman.[18]

We supplement this historical overview with our own corpus analysis of the forms *Frau Präsident* vs. *Frau Präsidentin* in the Bundestag protocols (Fig. 5). *Frau Präsident* (female address + masculine form) existed for some time (6th-11th legislature, 1969-1987) but was never more frequent than *Frau Präsidentin* (female address + feminine form).[19] After the 11th legislature (i.e. after 1990), it disappeared almost completely, until in the 19th legislature (2017-2021), there was a very slight rise again. This is mostly due to the AfD ('Alternative for Germany', a right-wing populist party), contributing 40 of the 49 usages (81.60%) in this legislature. In total, we see that the reinforcement to use feminine forms for female referents had the desired effects: From the 1980s onwards, we generally see "a dramatic increase" in the use of feminine forms in the protocols, which had been "virtually non-existent in the debates before" (Stecker et al. 2021: 1). Today, the *Protokoll Inland* ('Domestic Protocol') states that female officials should be addressed with feminised forms (e.g. *Präsidentin* or *Ministerin*) both orally and in writing (see Bundesministerium des Innern 2016; Wissenschaftliche Dienste Deutscher Bundestag 2021). If a party opposes such regulations, it is often a deliberate, reactionary act that linguistically reflects the party's ideology. In the case of the AfD, this includes their staunch rejection of gender-inclusive language

[18] Deutscher Bundestag, Plenarprotokoll 11/96, 6559, https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/11/11096.pdf

[19] It is worth noting that these forms of address for female presidents are not limited to Presidents of the Bundestag. Similar titles have also been used for other presidencies, such as *Alterspräsidentin* Frau Dr. Dr. h.c. Lüders (the oldest member of parliament presiding over the first session until a regular president is elected) in the 2nd legislature, and for female vice-presidents, such as Anke Fuchs in the 14th and Edelgard Bulmahn in the 18th legislature.

and their broader anti-feminist and anti-queer agenda (see section 4).

3.3 *Bürgerinnen und Bürger*: Pair forms as a means of gender-inclusive legal language

Our third example focuses on the incorporation of more gender-inclusive language in legal texts, taking the discussion a step further than in section 3.2. There, we explored efforts to enhance the visibility of individual women. Here, we widen the scope to address broader issues of inclusivity, encompassing all personal nouns, regardless of their specificity.

The following resolution, passed in the Bundestag on July 24, 1991 with the votes of the CDU/CSU and the FDP ('Free Democratic Party', a liberal political party), reminds us of current debates about gender-inclusive language:

> The Federal Government is called upon to avoid gender-specific terms in all draft laws, ordinances and administrative regulations with immediate effect, and to either choose gender-neutral formulations or to use formulations that refer to both genders.[20]

This resolution was adopted because of an application submitted by the CDU/CSU parliamentary group. The SPD, the Greens and the Left Party had originally proposed a more comprehensive resolution with stricter obligations. As a result, they chose to abstain from the vote. However, there was cross-party agreement that the exclusive use of masculine forms in legal language was no longer appropriate. This, too, had been preceded by long discussions, as Parliamentary State Secretary Rainer Funke (FDP) explained:

> This critical attitude towards our language is now accepted and taken seriously. This was not always the case. It was a long and arduous way to get there; a way that began with controversial opinions, sometimes with mutual accusations by men and women, with exaggerated ideas and unobjective objections.[21]

The interconnectedness of language and gender equality was also made clear in the resolution:

> The correct way of addressing and referring to women is of great importance for the equal treatment of women and men in social reality. This particularly applies to official language that refers to specific facts and persons. However, also the choice of words in regulations needs to be revised.[22]

Efforts to achieve equality on this linguistic level were closely linked to successes of the women's movement. For example, the *Deutsche Frauenrat* ('German Women's Council') issued the first resolution on gender-inclusive legal language in 1982, in which they officially called for the legislature to use gender-inclusive language. This was motivated by feminist lin-

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20 Own translation, Deutscher Bundestag 12/1041: Unterrichtung durch die Bundesregierung: Maskuline und feminine Personenbezeichnungen in der Rechtssprache, 07.08.1991: https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/12/010/1201041.pdf

21 Own translation, Deutscher Bundestag, Plenarprotokoll 12/132, 11525, https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/12/12132.pdf

22 Own translation, Unterrichtung durch die Bundesregierung. Maskuline und feminine Personenbezeichnungen in der Rechtssprache, Drucksache 12/1041, https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/12/010/1201041.pdf

guists from the New Women's movement in the 1970s (Schewe-Gerigk 2004: 322).

We see that these political achievements were not easily won; rather, they were the result of persistent efforts, with every detail being fought for through numerous discussions, particularly by feminist groups.

Since then, many new or revised laws have been formulated along these lines (old ones remain unchanged). The masculine generic has continued to decline in legal and political language. This can be seen in the New Year's and Christmas addresses of the Federal Chancellors and Presidents of the last 30 years (see Müller-Spitzer et al. 2024). The masculine generic has been replaced by pair forms such as *Bürgerinnen und Bürger* ('female and male citizens'), gender-neutral forms (epicenes) such as *Rettungskräfte* ('rescue workers'), *Alte* ('the elderly'), or *Arbeitslose* ('the unemployed'), as well as pronominal paraphrases such as *wir alle* ('all of us') or *alle, die* ('all those who'). In his first New Year's address, the former chancellor Olaf Scholz (SPD) did not use a single masculine generic form (Müller-Spitzer et al. 2022, Müller-Spitzer et al. 2024). Pair forms, epicenes and paraphrases are considered subtle and long-established forms of gender-inclusive language, as can be seen from the positive ratings in an acceptability survey about different gender-inclusive forms by the German broadcasting service WDR (WDR 2023, see also Zacharski 2024). This is why politicians and other public figures, whose language is under much public scrutiny, tend to use these forms rather than the contested gender symbols or their phonetic realisation as a glottal stop.

Our own corpus analyses of the Bundestag protocols show that the use of pair forms has also become established in this text type. Figure 6 illustrates the constant rise of these forms in the plural, especially with the feminine form

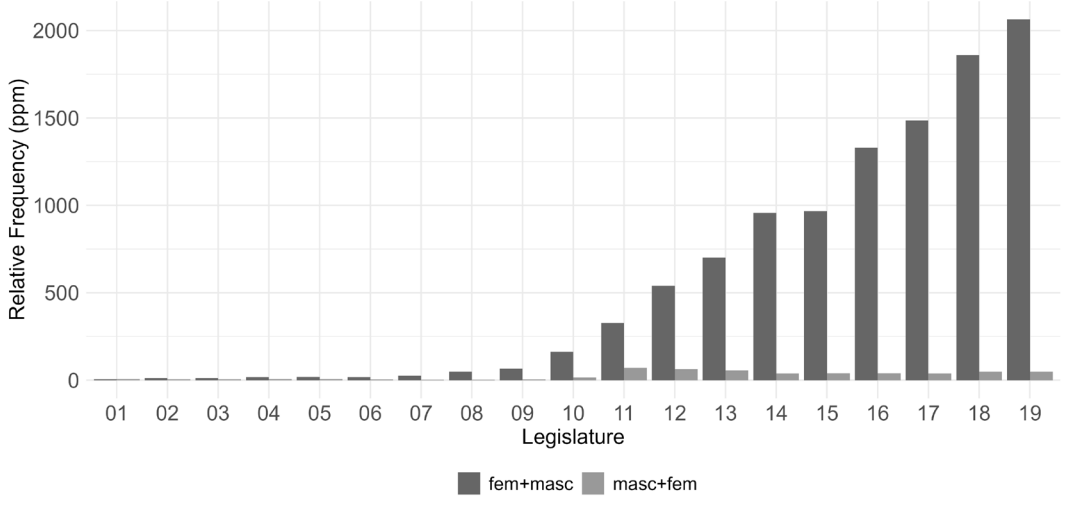

Figure 6: Relative frequencies of pair forms (feminine first, masculine first) in Bundestag protocols from 1949 to 2021. Only plural forms with the same lexical base were extracted (i.e. forms like *Damen und Herren* 'ladies and gentlemen' or *Frauen und Männer* 'women and men' are not part of the analysis).

in the first place (*Kolleginnen und Kollegen*, 'female and male colleagues'). Pair forms with the masculine form in the first slot (*Kollegen und Kolleginnen*, 'male and female colleagues') are much rarer. This 'feminine-first rule' in pair forms has been observed in other studies as well (Rosar 2022; Truan 2019, Ochs 2025). In a case study of the pair form *Bürgerinnen und Bürger* ('female and male citizens') in Bundestag protocols, Müller (2022: 126) also finds that it

leagues in the parliament (*Kolleginnen und Kollegen, Kollegen und Kolleginnen*) is most prominent in both graphs, followed by the 'topics' of political debates – the citizens (*Bürgerinnen und Bürger, Bürger und Bürgerinnen*). Most top-ten pair forms are shared by both formats; only three forms are unique. In the feminine-first forms, we find *Patientinnen und Patienten* ('female and male patients'). In the masculine-first forms, we see *Bauern und Bäuerinnen* ('male and

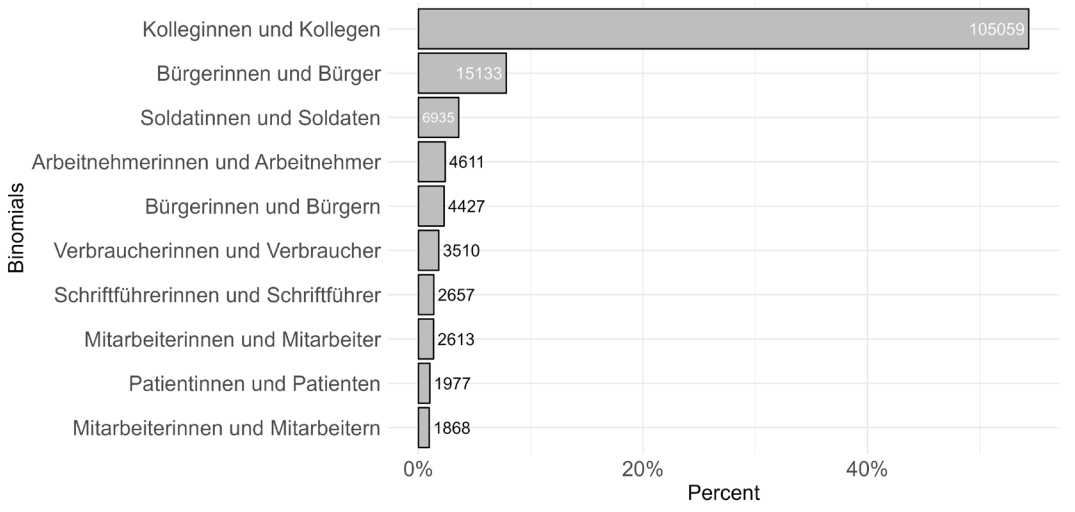

Figure 7: The ten most frequent pair forms with a feminine form in the first slot (total amount of types: 3,526; total amount of tokens: 193,242); Bundestag protocols 1949-2021.

has been on the rise since 1979, while generic uses of the masculine form *Bürger* are declining.[23] This is in line with Truan's findings that "[i]n German political discourse specifically, it has become usual – or politically correct – to use [pair forms]" (2019: 206).

Figures 7 and 8 show our analyses of the ten most frequent plural pair forms in the protocols. We see that the direct address of col-

female farmers') and *Rentner und Rentnerinnen* ('male and female pensioners') in 6th and 7th place, respectively.

This concludes our overview of feminist linguistic struggles and linguistic developments in the Bundestag, which can be summarised as follows: 1) It was achieved that female MPs were no longer marked as outliers by adding *Frau* to their names on lists. 2) Wom-

[23] However, Müller notes a slight rise of the masculine generic since 2018 due to the right-wing populist party AfD.

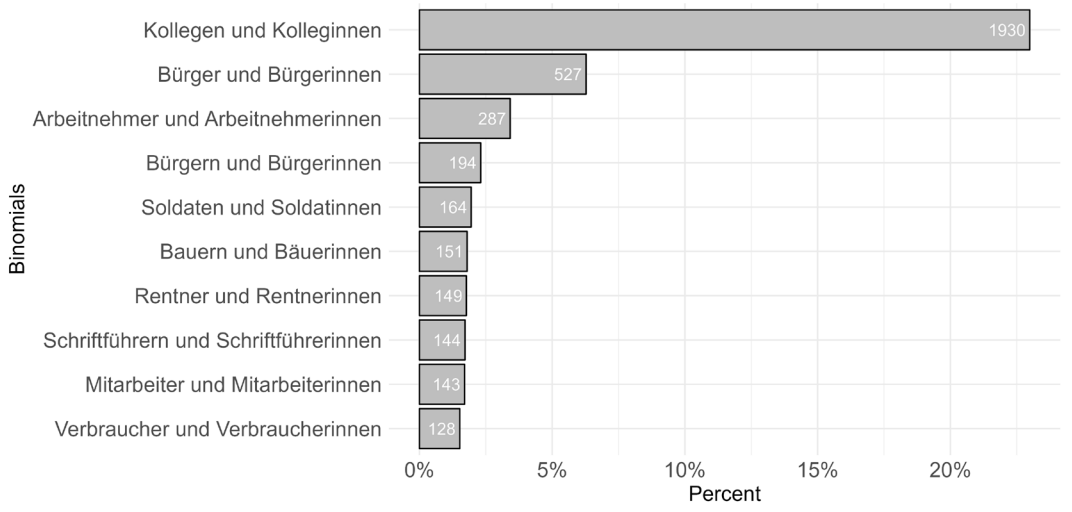

Figure 8: The ten most frequent pair forms with a masculine form in the first slot (total amount of types: 1,707; total amount of tokens: 8,396), Bundestag protocols 1949-2021.

en's visibility was instead increased by the obligatory use of feminised forms for specific female individuals. 3) Pair forms have become an established means in parliamentary and legal language to refer to both men and women, replacing masculine generics in new and revised legal texts. These linguistic debates can only be fully understood within the broader context of the women's movement of the 1980s and the growing push for women's emancipation. The resulting linguistic changes were not 'organic' but were explicitly negotiated among parliamentarians. In Section 4, we delve further into the ongoing political struggle surrounding gender-inclusive language.

4 *Wissenschaftler*innen* and *Kolleg:innen:* Current debates about gender-inclusive language

In this final section, we focus on how the past linguistic battles about language, gender, and naming sexual orientation relate to current debates about gender-inclusive language. We have presented political struggles about queer self-designations as well as feminist linguistic efforts. The debate about recent developments in gender-inclusive German can be understood as a crossroads of these dimensions: The contested new elements, the so-called gender symbols, are intended to encompass all gender identities (see Friedrich et al. 2021, Körner et al. 2022) and can therefore be regarded as an outcome of queer-feminist efforts. The most commonly used symbols today are the asterisk (*Wissenschaftler*innen* 'scientists of all genders') and the colon (*Wissenschaftler:innen*, see Waldendorf 2023, Ochs & Rüdiger 2025). They are inserted between the masculine base and the feminising suffix *-in*; some consider them altogether new suffixes (Völkening 2022).

Gender symbols are the focus of current linguistic battles around gender and language. Other strategies of gender-inclusive

language, such as pair forms, neutralisations, or pronominal substitutions, are rarely if ever part of the debates, as they are an established and norm-conforming part of the German language system. Gender symbols, however, intervene with traditional word formation processes and can result in grammatical follow-up problems, especially when used in the singular, where whole noun phrases would need to be changed into complex forms (e.g. *ein*e kritische*r Politiker*in* 'a critical politician'; however, these forms are very rare, see Ochs in press). In the plural, the use is less complicated, as noun phrase elements remain unchanged (e.g. *die kritischen Politiker*innen* 'the critical politicians'; see Friedrich et al. 2021). Opponents of gender symbols use the argument of ungrammaticality and deviation from norms to advocate for bans and restrictions (e.g. Eisenberg 2020, 2022). However, research has shown that gender symbols are a rare phenomenon, mostly limited to particular media outlets (Waldendorf 2023, Ochs & Rüdiger 2025), job postings (Müller-Spitzer & Ochs 2023), or queer communities (Löhr 2021). Looking at non-gender-inclusive texts, Müller-Spitzer et al. (2024) found that only about 1% of all tokens would undergo changes if gender-inclusive reformulations were adopted – and this is not to say that all reformulations would involve a gender symbol, as other substitution processes are available in German (e.g. substituting the masculine generic *Lehrer* 'teachers' with the epicene *Lehrkräfte*). Therefore, the quantitative aspect of the phenomenon alone is insufficient to explain the heated debate surrounding it. Rather, we have to consider its symbolic and indexical dimensions.

Feilke (2023) discusses these dimensions in detail, arguing that the grammatical point of view is only one aspect to consider in the use of gender symbols. Rather, their use should be understood as a signal of respect and courtesy. As signals, the symbols can be used in relevant positions, while being omitted in others. Thus, Feilke argues for a flexible use of gender-inclusive language, advocating for a mix of strategies and for the use of signals (like gender symbols) only where deemed appropriate and necessary. This flexibility is also called for in most style and writing guides (e.g. Diewald & Steinhauer 2020).

To the best of our knowledge, there is no instance of an official institution prescribing the use of gender symbols – only recommendations and preferences are found in respective guidelines (Siegenthaler 2024: 240). However, bans and prohibitions have become more common on the federal level: the federal states Bavaria, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, Schleswig-Holstein, Brandenburg and Rhineland-Palatinate have started banning the use of gender symbols in all official contexts (Lischewski 2023), i.e. in schools, administrative bodies, etc. These bans are mostly based on the grammaticality arguments outlined above, as well as on the orthographic status of the gender symbols as 'special characters': They are not considered part of German core orthography by the *Rat für Deutsche Rechtschreibung* ('Council for German Orthography', see Hennig 2024: 220), the official body regulating German orthographic norms. Although this does not mean that gender symbols are orthographically wrong, it is often interpreted in this way to legitimise prohibitions. So far, it is not clear how violations of these bans will be prosecuted – for example, it can still be at the teachers' individual discretion whether the use of gender symbols in students' texts is considered a mistake or not. However, teachers themselves are not allowed to use the symbols

in official documents, e.g. in letters to parents or work sheets for students, and are forced – at least in some states – to mark them as mistakes in exams.[24] The bans are considered constitutionally problematic by the Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency (2024).

Similar to the linguistic battles of the Bundestag outlined so far, the struggle about gender symbols goes beyond language use. It is closely tied to shifting social norms, especially to the question of how to address people beyond the gender binary. Gender symbols are both about self-designation as in the case of *schwul* and *lesbisch*, as well as about the linguistically adequate representation of certain groups, as in the case of pair forms and feminisations. We regularly see that opponents of gender symbols tend to use these linguistic forms as a straw man argument to cover anti-queer positions. This was the case with Sabine Mertens, initiator of a failed petition to ban gender symbols in official bodies of the city of Hamburg: In an interview with *Hamburger Abendblatt*, she clearly stated that her intentions go beyond language and against the LGBTQIA+ movement (Müller-Spitzer, Ochs & Rüdiger 2024). This has strong links to the straw man arguments used in the Bundestag to prohibit the use of self-chosen terms for homosexual people (section 2).

By now, the debate about gender symbols has also reached the Bundestag. To illustrate this, a plenary debate from June 2023 on gender-inclusive language provides a compelling example:[25] The AfD parliamentary group claims that a clear majority of about two-thirds of the German population rejects the introduction of the so-called *Gendersprache* ('gender language'; a term that is used by opponents of inclusive language). They argue that it reflects an ideological stance challenging the 'natural' biological gender system. They demand that the Bundestag and government authorities refrain from using 'gendered language' in their communications and instead promote traditional linguistic norms, including the use of the masculine generic. Furthermore, the AfD calls for uniform language standards in schools and universities based on official spelling rules. They emphasize the importance of the German language as a pillar of democracy and cultural identity, implying that 'gendered language' poses a threat to this cultural asset. MPs of other parties react in various ways to this request: Katja Leikert (CDU/CSU) takes a neutral stance, highlighting individual freedom as a key factor in the use of gender-inclusive language. This is harshly criticised by Denise Loop (The Greens), who underlines the role of CDU/CSU in bans on gender-inclusive language in the state of Thüringen. Loop emphasises that the AfD, contrary to what they claim, is the only party on the federal level that repeatedly demands bans on gender-inclusive language instead of focussing on other issues of gender equality.

Over the past years, the AfD has introduced five motions on the issue, while other

[24] https://www.hessenschau.de/politik/hessische-schueler-duerfen-in-abschlusspruefungen-keine-genderzeichen-mehr-verwenden-v2,genderverbot-schulen-abschlusspruefungen-hessen-100.html (accessed December 2024).

[25] https://www.bundestag.de/mediathek/video?videoid=7555395#url=L21lZGlhdGhla292ZXJsYXk/dmlkZW9pZD03NTU1Mzk1&mod=mediathek;%20
Deutscher%20Bundestag,%20Drucksache%2020/7348:%20
https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/20/073/2007348.pdf

parties have refrained from addressing gender-inclusive language as a political topic at all (see Lobin 2023). This creates the (seemingly) paradoxical situation in which the party most opposed to the issue is also the one bringing it into political discourse. The reactionary stance of right-wing parties in contesting gender-inclusive language is a phenomenon that has been observed globally (see Erdocia 2022, Roth and Sauer 2022), especially as a pretence to challenge gender equality and diversity as a social rather than a linguistic concept.

The plenary debate shows how the topic of gender-inclusive language, or rather gender symbols, is evaluated and discussed by MPs of various parties. On a more linguistic level, the question arises how the explicit use of non-binary forms should be transcribed in the protocols – cf. the discussion about the inclusion of terms like *schwul* and *lesbisch* in section 2. If an MP uses a phonetic realisation of gender symbols (e.g. a glottal stop between masculine base and feminine ending: *Politiker*innen* → *Politiker[ʔ]innen* 'politicians'), then the stenographic transcription and later the protocol must accurately represent this. Therefore, discussions about the official inclusion of gender symbols in the transcription process arise (Hallik 2020: 86). The official linguistic counselling institution of the Bundestag, the GfdS, says: "If gender gaps [i.e. glottal stops] are used in spoken language as representations of gender asterisks or comparable forms, it is unclear how to properly transcribe them (e.g. in protocols of speeches)."[26] The protocol of the plenary debate summarised above shows this lack of clarity: It is unclear from the audio file whether Denise Loop (The Greens) uses feminine forms to denote all addresses (i.e. feminine generics, e.g. *Kolleginnen* 'colleagues', *Parteifreundinnen* 'party friends'), or a glottal stop (e.g. *Kolleg*innen, Parteifreund-*innen*). Katja Leikert (CDU/CSU) utters a clear glottal stop in *AfDler*innen* ('AfD party members'), metalinguistically commenting on it afterwards. Both this clear and the unclear instances are transcribed with a slash followed by a dash in the protocol, i.e. *Kolleg/-innen, Parteifreund/-innen* and *AfDler/-innen*. On the one hand, this choice can certainly be justified by the fact that the spelling with slash and dash is the only abridged variant officially accepted by the Council for German Orthography. On the other hand, it is questionable whether the transcriber was truthful to Loop's utterance, as a glottal stop is not clearly audible. This might be a case of hypercorrection, assuming that an MP of the Green party uses glottal stops (thereby perhaps undermining the linguistic choice of feminine generics). Besides that, the spelling with slash and dash does not have the same indexical and symbolic dimensions as gender symbols – rather, it is a variant to shorten the binary pair form (e.g. *Kolleginnen und Kollegen* to *Kolleg/-innen*), lacking the non-binary intensions of the asterisk and the colon (Diewald & Steinhauer 2020: 122).

Several layers of linguistic choices converge here in competition: the pursuit of orthographic accuracy in protocols, the alignment of phonetic and graphematic representation, and the indexical aspirations embodied in new gender symbols. These tensions in parliamentary transcription practices reflect the broader debate about the legitimacy of socially motivated linguistic interventions and the complex interplay between natural and artificial

[26] Own translation; https://gfds.de/gendersternchen/

language change (Haspelmath 2019). Such interventions, as illustrated in sections 2 and 3, are neither new nor inherently destabilizing for language; rather, they are part of an ongoing negotiation between societal values and linguistic forms. The controversy surrounding gender symbols, for instance, highlights the symbolic weight that language carries in broader discussions of equality and diversity.

As with earlier language controversies, this "language struggle [...] is actually a cultural war" (Simon 2022: 22). While tacit consensus has emerged in areas such as pair forms or gender-neutral terms, the deeper social issues these practices address—questions of equity and representation—often fade from focus (Hark & Villa 2015). The stakes extend beyond grammar, encompassing fundamental challenges to worldviews, emancipatory efforts, and demands for participation (Simon 2022: 22).

5 Concluding remarks

Struggles about language, gender, and sexual orientation have surfaced in the German Bundestag since the 1980s. We outlined how the terms *schwul* and *lesbisch* were normalised in the protocols as self-chosen terms for homosexual people. Further, we analysed how feminist efforts led to more gender-inclusive language both in the parliamentary debates and in legal texts. Last, we summarised ongoing linguistic discussions about gender symbols and how the topic is negotiated in the Bundestag. The Bundestag plenary protocols serve as a valuable source for these socio-political struggles, as our small-scale corpus analyses have shown. Further, more in-depth evaluations—such as the role of gender in interjections, the specific word choices of certain parties, or the transcription of glottal stops—would be desirable for future research.

The chronological overview presented in this paper shows that political and parliamentary disputes about our world are often deeply intertwined with disputes over words and labels. Questions of who speaks about whom, using which linguistic forms, and who holds the authority to determine what language is deemed acceptable in which contexts, are fundamentally questions of power—questions that have consistently shaped linguistic and political debates surrounding shifting social norms.

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