Dominic Schmitz, Simon David Stein and Viktoria Schneider
Linguistic intersections of language and gender: Introduction

1 Setting the scene: Language and gender

"Stop teaching kids pronouns and start teaching them grammar!"
– Laverne Spicer, 13 September 2022[1]

This demand, emblematic of the backlash against efforts to make language more gender-inclusive, reveals its own contradiction: Pronouns are, after all, a fundamental part of grammar. Such calls underscore the confusion and emotional charge that often fuel resistance to linguistic change, particularly in regard to questions of gender. But what exactly is gender, and how do language and gender intersect?

Answering these questions requires a clear differentiation of related yet distinct terms. In most cultures, *sex* is a social distinction based on physiological – or, as often termed, 'biological' – characteristics. *Gender*, from a social science perspective, encompasses the social, psychological, cultural, and behavioral aspects of a given identity, such as that of a woman (Haig 2004). Gender includes social structures, such as gender roles and expressions (Lindqvist et al. 2021; Bates et al. 2022). Many cultures, particularly those of the global north, have traditionally adhered to a binary model of gender, wherein individuals are categorized into one of two groups (cf. Maddux and Winstead 2019). These categories are typically aligned with those defined by sex. However, individuals who are outside this binary challenge these traditional systems and often face discrimination based on their gender (e.g., Richards et al. 2016).

In linguistic research, the terms *grammatical gender* (*genus*), *natural gender* (*sexus*), *lexico-semantic gender*, and *conceptual gender* are commonly used to describe the intersections of sex, gender, and language (cf., e.g., Kotthoff and Nübling 2024). *Grammatical gender* refers to noun classes which are reflected in the behavior

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1 The original tweet on Twitter was deleted by Spicer. However, screenshots are still being circulated, see, for example, https://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/21-incredible-replies-people-spouted-234602965.html, accessed: 07 February 2025.

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of associated words (Hockett 1958), dividing nouns into two or more distinct classes (Siemund 2008). These classes often trigger the appearance of certain formal exponents in their syntactic surroundings (e.g., in articles, adjectives, pronouns; Corbett 1991). *Natural gender* aligns with the concept of sex as it appears in linguistic analysis. *Lexico-semantic gender* refers to the intrinsic sex-related characteristics in many words used to refer to animate beings, for instance, the class 'female' in *mother* or *sister* and the class 'male' in *father* or *brother*. Finally, *conceptual gender* relates to the association of words with gender stereotypes.

In languages with grammatical gender, nouns referring to animate beings often reflect their sex or gender both lexico-semantically and grammatically. For instance, the word for *mother* typically belongs to the grammatical gender class 'female', while *father* aligns with the 'male' class. This alignment, known as the *Genus-Sexus-Prinzip* ('genus-sexus principle'), demonstrates that, even though grammatical gender by no means always corresponds with gender or sexus, there is a tendency for genus and gender or sex to interlink. This phenomenon is also observable in cases in which genus and gender or sexus do not match; cases commonly characterized by derogatory intentions (Eisenberg and Schöneich 2020; Kopeke and Zubin 2020). For example, in Italian, *checca* 'fairy (a pejorative term for an effeminate gay man)' takes the feminine genus, while for women, the neuter genus is sometimes used in derogatory terms, such as the German *Frauenzimmer* 'wench' (Nübling 2020; Werner 2012). These mismatches underscore the interplay between grammatical gender and social constructs of gender, as their marked usage relies on the general expectation of alignment between genus and sex or gender. In other words, the genus-sexus principle and its violation clearly demonstrate that language and gender do indeed intersect.

Although this volume does not intend to make a political statement, the contributions in it certainly address language policy – a highly political and often contentious topic. Omitting this discussion would itself constitute a political stance. Thus, we emphasize that all contributions focus on analyzing the intersections between various notions of gender and language. Current language policies primarily consider how *gender-fair*, *gender-neutral*, or *gender-inclusive* a given term or phrase is. While we leave the choice and definition of these terms to the individual contributions, linguistic and psychological research across multiple languages brought forward empirical evidence that certain language features often exhibit a male bias (for French, e.g., Gygax et al. 2008; Kim et al. 2023; for German, e.g., Schunack and Binanzer 2022; Schmitz 2024; for Italian, e.g., Cacciari and Padovani 2007; Horvath et al. 2016; for Spanish, e.g., Andriychenko et al. 2024; Anaya-Ramírez et al. 2022). Consequently, language policies seek either to replace such features or, conversely, to preserve them, often by questioning the evidence of bias. The latter stance frequently claims that language and sex or gender are unconnected. How-

ever, as demonstrated by the genus-sexus principle, this claim cannot be universally upheld.

The contributions in this volume are concerned with uncovering, analyzing, and discussing further intersections of language and gender. They address questions such as how gender is encoded grammatically and how novel gender-inclusive grammatical structures might function (Chapter 2), and how gendered forms are distributed across a language (Chapter 3). They investigate how lexico-semantic and conceptual gender manifest in nouns and adjectives (Chapters 4 and 9), as well as how individuals outside the binary are linguistically represented and dealt with (Chapters 5 and 13). Further, they examine how differences between L1 and L2 gender systems affect the comprehension of gender (Chapters 6 and 7), and how pronoun comprehension may be modeled more generally (Chapter 8). They highlight the importance of task selection in studying language and gender (Chapter 10), and offer strategies for making classrooms (Chapter 12) and language as such more gender-inclusive (Chapter 11).

2 The articles in this volume

In what follows, we will provide a concise overview of the individual articles included in this volume. Each summary offers a glimpse into the unique contributions made by the authors, spanning various facets of linguistic inquiry. Collectively, the articles illustrate the multifaceted nature of gender linguistic research.

Our volume opens with the contribution *What if −*in is a new suffix?* by Lena Völkening. The chapter explores the emergence and current usage of gender-inclusive nouns in German that incorporate morphological structures beyond the grammarian tradition. The forms are analyzed from a constructionist perspective with regard to their phonological, morphosyntactic, and semantic properties, and it is argued that these forms feature variants of a new gender-inclusive suffix. Building on this comprehensive account of the novel gender-inclusive forms, it is concluded that the new suffix is gradually being integrated into the mental grammar of language users, reflecting a shift towards more gender-inclusive language practices.

With their contribution *Of stars and colons: A corpus-based analysis of gender-inclusive orthographies in German press texts*, Samira Ochs and Jan Oliver Rüdiger provide a quantitative baseline for the distribution of different gendered forms in German press texts. Based on a text corpus with more than one billion tokens from fifteen press sources, the authors accounted for the share of occurrences of generic

masculines[2] and more gender-inclusive forms in a microdiachronic analysis. It was found that generic masculines are still the most frequent form by far, and that in the realm of more gender-inclusive forms those forms which reflect the gender-binary show decreasing numbers while those which include genders beyond the binary are on the rise. Notably, the political orientation of a pertinent source is reflected in the use of forms: Gender-inclusive forms beyond the binary are found mostly in left-leaning sources. This contribution offers several insights: a quantitative baseline regarding the shares of gendered forms, an account on how the frequencies of more gender-inclusive forms develop microdiachronically, and a first glimpse into the role of political orientation regarding the choice of gendered forms.

The contribution *Women are sexy and men provoke – Gender stereotypes in use of the German adjective aufreizend* by Jens Fleischhauer and Dila Turus investigated the uses of the German adjective *aufreizend* in a corpus study. Many adjectives show a preference of referring either to female or male referents based on stereotypical attributes assigned to gender identities. That is, they hold conceptual gender information. For example, men are often described as *aggressive*, while women are often described as *emotional*. The adjective *aufreizend* may have one of two interpretations: *arousing* or *provocative*. The authors performed a corpus analysis to find attestations for *aufreizend* with female and male referents. Potentially influential factors like the syntactic and event structure were controlled for and entered the analysis together with the variable of interest, the referent's gender. Similar to other gender-biased adjectives, the sexual reading of the two, *arousing*, is mostly used for female referents whereas the other, *provocative*, is predominantly used for male referents. The study contributes to the findings that stereotypical gender-specific features influence language use.

Sol Tovar, in her contribution *Understanding (mis)gender(ing) and pronouns from a politeness theory standpoint*, presents a detailed qualitative case study of a German speech held in 2022 in the *Bundestag* (German Federal Parliament), discussing the practice of misgendering and other forms of gender-related linguistic wounding in light of politeness theory. German features grammatical, natural, lexico-semantic, and conceptual gender, and hence offers a variety of gendered forms which have wounding potential. The author examines the linguistic strategies by which Beatrix von Storch, cisgender woman and member of the far-right party AfD, attacks Tessa Ganserer, transgender woman and member of the center-left Greens. Tovar shows that von Storch capitalizes on the wounding potential of gendered language, for example by using discriminative and exclusionary identity

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2 Generic masculines are grammatically masculine role nouns which are used with the intention of conveying a gender-neutral meaning.

markers for Ganserer (misgendering, deadnaming). The author offers an interpretation of this in an impoliteness framework by conceptualizing such strategies as face-threatening acts to the interlocutor's *gender face*. In doing so, the contribution provides us with useful categories of analysis to be added to a methodological toolbox that can analyze the social functions of gendered language.

Dominic Schmitz's contribution *Pronoun comprehension from a discriminative perspective: A proof of concept* investigates the semantics and comprehension of pronouns in English. Focusing on *he, she*, plural *they* and generic singular *they*, an array of computational methods is used to shed light on these pronouns' semantic interrelations and comprehension features. Naive discriminative learning was used to compute vector representations of the semantics of English words excluding pronouns. Vector representations of pronoun semantics were computed based on the mean of the vectors of the words surrounding a pronoun, rendering the semantics of each pronoun token context-sensitive. Using vector representations of all words, including those for pronouns, linear discriminative learning was implemented to extract measures on pronoun comprehension. Comparing the measures of the four pronoun types to each other, it was found that generic singular *they* shows characteristics distinct from *he* and *she* on the one and plural *they* on the other hand. The contribution offers a new perspective for the investigation of pronoun semantics and comprehension.

Simon David Stein and Viktoria Schneider, in their article *Effects of English generic singular they on the gender processing of L1 German speakers*, breathe new life into the short story approach, an experimental method which can test for the gender-neutrality of pronouns, role nouns, or other gendered forms in a well-disguised way. To illustrate this approach, the authors test which of the English pronouns *their* and *his* is interpreted as more gender-neutral by L1 German speakers when these pronouns are used generically. They asked their L1 German participants to write a short story following one of two versions of the sentence *On [pronoun] first day at school, a pupil is usually very nervous*, with either *their* or *his* as pronoun. Using this method, they first replicate the male bias for *his* known from other studies, with *his* being associated with significantly more male protagonists than female protagonists in the stories. Stein and Schneider then find some support for the idea that generically used singular *they* can reduce this bias. Given that the authors investigated L1 German learners of English, this tells us that linguistic gender bias can carry over to learners of languages with semantic gender assignment who speak languages with predominantly morphosyntactic gender assignment systems, hinting at possible transfer effects.

With their contribution *Form identity and gendered associations: L2 English −er activates the bias of L1 German −er*, Dominic Schmitz, Julia Blessing-Plötner, Nazire Cinar, Nguyet Minh Dang, Henrike Hoffmanns, fNadja Khadouj, Aaron Luther, Im-

ran Peksen, and Tomma Robke take inspiration from the short story approach revived by Simon David Stein and Viktoria Schneider. To answer the question whether the male bias found in German generic masculines ending in the *−er* suffix is transferred to English role nouns ending in *−er*, participants had to write a short story in German, their L1, following three prompts in English, their L2. Irrespective of the stereotypicality of the role nouns in the English prompts, participants made use of mostly masculine forms as translations. To further investigate the role of the *−er* suffix, in a subsequent translation task, the same participants were asked to translate role nouns from English to German. The authors found that the *−er* suffix does indeed facilitate the transfer of the male bias from L1 German to L2 English. These findings present novel evidence for the transfer of biases between L1s and L2s and the first evidence of the relevance of form identity in this process.

The contribution *Gender inclusive or not? Covert gender patterns in Georgian* by Zaal Kikvidze presents work on the gender-inclusiveness of occupational nouns in Georgian. This contribution stands out, as Georgian is a genderless language. That is, in contrast to grammatical gender languages like Spanish or German and notional gender languages like English, Georgian does not mark gender. Why, then, is gender-inclusiveness a topic in Georgian? A language without gender marking surely is gender-inclusive, as it, for example, lacks the typical bias of masculine defaults. This quick assumption is shown to be premature and incorrect by the results of a questionnaire on occupational nouns lacking morphological and semantic information on gender. Participants had to provide two names for fictional characters for each occupation and, even though the target words are, from a structural perspective, gender-neutral, participants selected typical male names for several occupations and typical female names for others. This contribution hence takes a different perspective on the intersections of language and gender: Even with a structurally gender-neutral language, gender-inclusiveness is not achieved, as societal stereotypes in the form of conceptual gender information overwrite gender-neutral notions.

In the contribution *Gender-inclusive language and male bias: Task matters!*, Francesca Panzeri and Martina Abbondanza examine the impact of generic masculines on the perception of inclusiveness in various contexts. The study involved 245 participants who evaluated job offers and advertisements in Italian presented using three different linguistic strategies: generic masculines, feminization, and neutralization. Their findings showed that the use of generic masculines in comparison to feminization or neutralization did not make participants feel less motivated, connected, included, or satisfied, regardless of the context. Further, the study found no significant difference between the feminization and neutralization strategies. While at first glance, these results challenge the notion that the use of masculine generics inherently contradicts gender-inclusiveness, at second glance it demon-

strates the importance of experimental paradigm choice. That is, this contribution illustrates that more metalinguistic tasks, which access participants' conscious reflection on language, may provide different evidence on gender bias than more implicit tasks, which access participants' subconscious language perception and comprehension. Overall, the present findings highlight the complexity of gender representation in language and the research thereof.

Laura Vela and Marina Ortega give an overview about the discussion on gender-fair language in their contribution *Theoretical and empirical basis for gender-fair language use: The case of Spanish.* Arguments in favor and against the use of gender-fair language are compared by example of Spanish, a grammatical gender language in which the grammatical masculine is the standard strategy to refer to referents independent of their gender. In Spanish, several different options to use gender-fair language, which can be divided in two broader categories, are under debate. First, a symmetrical use of gender-inclusive strategies like neutralization, gender-neutral pronouns, neo-pronouns, elided nominals, and the use of special symbols. Second, the explicit inclusion of women used in pair coordination, abbreviated forms with slashes or grammatically female forms instead of grammatical masculine forms to refer to a gender-mixed group of referents. Apart from the different gender strategies, the authors discuss several different approaches to feminist language reforms, enriching the main discussion of gender-fair language in general with a political component. The authors use real language examples from Spanish to show that gender-fair language is not only possible in Spanish, but also shows a positive effect on language attitudes and behavior. That is, the use of gender-fair language maps to a social change which can be fortified and is visible in language use.

The chapter *Teaching Spanish in the Philippines: A queer-decolonial pedagogy* by Jeff Roxas presents an autoethnographic exploration of implementing gender-inclusive language and queer-affirming pedagogies in the context of teaching Spanish in the Philippines. Drawing from experiences as a queer Spanish professor, the author addresses the challenges posed by the gendered structure of the Spanish language, which often conflicts with the more gender-neutral L1s of Filipino students. Through a historical overview and a sociolinguistic analysis, the contribution advocates for a decolonized approach to language instruction that promotes social justice and gender equality. The importance of developing teaching materials and practices that validate and celebrate diverse gender identities is underlined, arguing that such inclusivity is a fundamental human right and essential for enriching the educational experience of Filipino students.

The contribution *Morphosyntax and me: The reflections of a non-binary linguist on English gendered language* by D. Hunter provides novel insight into the remnants of gendered elements in English. As a first, this essay combines self-reflection and distributed morphology. Introspective self-reflection is used to investigate how dif-

ferent gendered terms cause varying levels of dysphoria for non-binary individuals. Then, the theoretical framework of distributed morphology is used to find an explanation as to why some terms are more distressing than others, proposing that the level of dysphoria is related to where and how gender attaches to words. The contribution provides not only a novel perspective on gender in English, for which gender linguistic research typically focuses on pronouns, but also food for thought for the everyday use of English.

3 Conclusion

In sum, the diverse contributions in this volume illustrate the thematic and methodological versatility of gender linguistics as an area of linguistic research. The collection of articles demonstrates that the intersections of language and gender are a meaningful topic for all languages, no matter whether they show a grammatical gender system, a notional gender system, or no gender system at all. Further, the contributions illustrate that the field of gender linguistics is explorable by a variety of different methods, from corpus analysis to experimental investigations to computational modeling. While these methods were illustrated by but a sample of different languages – English, Georgian, German, Italian, and Spanish – they may and should be used for similar investigations in other languages to further our knowledge of the interrelations of language and gender as a whole.

The ongoing public and also linguistic debate on efforts to make language more gender-inclusive is reflected in many of the contributions. The articles of the present volume tackle issues surrounding this discussion from different perspectives and offer insights to advance the debate. Most importantly, though, the contributions do not deviate from the descriptive nature of modern linguistics.

As editors, we not only believe that the volume at hand will be a valuable contribution to the area of gender linguistics, but also are convinced that language users may gain novel insights into the topic of gender-inclusive language and with that may reflect on their beliefs and opinions on the matter. In the ideal case, such reflection will do away with some of the opinionated sentiments surrounding gender-inclusive language in favor of scientifically informed opinion.

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