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# Excessiveness in a German Social Media Debate on Gender-fair Language

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**Abstract** Gender-fair language is a contested topic in contemporary Germany. Many reports on the introduction of language changes meant to reduce discrimination result in heated debates in print, online and social media.

In this article, I qualitatively analyse a selected debate on gender-fair language on Twitter to find out how excessive the language use is and who makes use of what kind of excessive language. The time frame of analysis covers a critical discourse moment in 2018 during which the *Council for German Orthography* for the first time dealt with new gender-fair spelling variants. Since the Council, being the only official language planning institution for German, publishes the official regulations on orthography valid in schools and administrative bodies in Germany, its decision was highly anticipated and disputed.

The analysed debate contained only a few argumentative exchanges on the topic. In general, it can be said that Twitter was mostly used to take a stance, not to engage in discussions. The overall style of the debate was polemic and exhibited many and various instances of excessive language use, mostly by opponents of gender-fair language. This group made use of vulgar language, pejoratives and in some cases direct insults. They especially questioned their adversaries' mental health. Only a few proponents used excessive language when they insinuated a lack of mental capacity in their adversaries.

**Keywords** gender-fair language, pejorative language, debate

## Introduction[1]

Gender-fair language is a contested topic in today's Germany. This becomes obvious when one looks at a few examples of the force this debate has adopted during the last years. In the most extreme cases, individuals who have publicly supported changes to make language more gender-fair have received death threats (see Baum 2014; Lobin 2021: 16). But many reports on the intro-

1 I would like to thank Katharina Pohl, Renata Westwater, Julia Baumann, the editors of this special issue, the anonymous reviewers as well as those who critically commented on my presentation on this topic at the ExLang conference for their various support and valuable contributions to this article.

duction of language changes meant to reduce discrimination result in heated debates in print, online and social media (see for example Hentsch 2014; Hiersemenzel 2021). Especially the national conservative right-wing party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) regularly takes up gender-fair language as a topic and warns against attacks on freedom of speech and expression undertaken by other political factions (see Lobin 2021; AfD 2019). The German public debate on the topic in newspapers, on TV, in social media—even in academia—has stalled, the proponents of changes to make language more gender-fair and the opponents of these kinds of changes seem irreconcilable.

Some aspects that contribute to explaining the rigour with which these debates are held, have been described in research: Lobin (2021) and Simon (2022) mention the significance of language for individuals' identities—also in combination with scepticism about language change. Lobin (2021) also stresses that right-wing populists try to revive the nationalistic understanding of language as the most important identity marker of national communities. Taking the perspective of those who defend gender-fair language, Müller-Spitzer (2022) points out that traditional language use, including male generics, does no longer correspond to notions of gender many people in our contemporary society hold. I have argued that proponents and opponents hold contradicting and contradictory language ideologies (see Acke 2022a, 2022b).

What is missing is a meta-analysis of the form of the debate: How do rigour, aggressiveness and excessiveness actually become apparent in the discussions? Therefore, in this article I will take a closer look at the way the debate is held instead of focussing on the contents. Analysing one specific instance when the debate flamed up, I will ask: In what ways can the language use in the German debate on gender-fair language be classified as excessive? Who makes use of what kinds of excessive language? With *excessive language*—a term coined by the editors of this special issue—I aim to summarise language use that in some way deviates from what many speakers consider suitable, civil or neutral. This includes hate speech, i. e. the linguistic expression of hate towards individuals or groups of people (see Meibauer 2013: 1), pejorative language use (see Hornscheidt 2011), verbal aggression (see Bonacchi 2017) and linguistic degradation (see Scharloth 2018), which can all be expressed explicitly but also implicitly. Especially social media and the Internet have been pointed out as contexts in which hate speech and

other forms of excessive language are abundant (see Assimakopoulos et al. 2017: 2; Marx 2017: 63; Stefanowitsch 2020: 185). Therefore, in my analysis I will focus on Twitter as the most widely used and, at the same time, publicly available social media channel.

## 2. Debates on gender-fair language in Germany

Before introducing my corpus and diving into the analysis, I will first contextualise the discussions on the topic in Germany during the last decades.[2] In the late 1970s, the German feminist movement and academia took up the US-American debate on women and language. The first academic texts on the topic in Germany were published in 1978 (Trömel-Plötz 1978; Andresen & Glück 1978). The aspect that has dominated German public debates from their beginnings in the late 1970s, is what is now referred to as male generics or *generisches Maskulinum*. German has a three-gender system featuring masculine, feminine and neuter nouns and pronouns.[3] The use of masculine forms for individuals of unknown or different genders is often called *generisches Maskulinum*. In the academic debate, the linguists Senta Trömel-Plötz and Luise F. Pusch were the first to argue that the use of these masculine forms was problematic as it remained unclear whether women were included or not and that the linguistic system of German was therefore sexist (see Trömel-Plötz 1978; Pusch 1979).

From the 1990s onwards, psycholinguistic research on German, Polish and other languages has shown that Trömel-Plötz and Pusch were right: masculine forms invoke images of male individuals in our brains to a significantly higher degree than gender-fair alternatives (see for example Oelkers 1996; Braun et al. 1998; Heise 2000, 2003; Stahlberg & Sczesny 2001; Braun et al. 2005; Formanowicz & Sczesny 2016). In the late 1970s, Trömel-Plötz and Pusch were met with derision by the linguistic community, but their contributions started a debate in German-speaking countries that has been going on for more than 40 years now (see Kotthoff & Nübling 2018: 18; Acke 2022a: 32–33). Of course, the debate has changed—as language has changed

2 Here, I will focus on Germany, the situation differs a little from that in other German-speaking countries, see for example Mairhofer & Posch (2017); Elmiger et al. (2017b).

3 For detailed linguistic accounts on gender in German see Kotthoff & Nübling (2018); Bußmann & Hellinger (2003).

(see Elmiger et al. 2017a; Acke 2019; Krome 2022). When we read some of Trömel-Plötz's examples today we are surprised that they were unusual or even shocking for contemporary readers, since today, so called *Beidnennungen* like *Teilnehmerinnen und Teilnehmer* [participants (male) and participants (female)] or neutralisations like *Studierende* [participle of studying] are the norm in direct address and often also beyond such use. The biggest change in the debate is connected to the changing understanding of gender in society: Whereas the idea of a male/female binary was hardly questioned in the early 1980s, it is now doubted by many (see also Müller-Spitzer 2022). A court ruling in 2017 led to the introduction of a third gender option in Germany in December 2018. At the same time, male generics are still defended with the same arguments as in the late 1970s and 1980s, for example with stating that there is no connection between grammatical gender and biological sex (see Reisigl & Spieß 2017). The focus of the irreconcilable debate now lies on different forms which have been suggested to replace male generics. In written German, these novel forms make use of special characters which are inserted between the root of the word and the female ending or otherwise employ orthography in an innovative manner. In oral German, a glottal stop is uttered between the root of the word and the female ending to serve the same functions.[4]

The forms that are mentioned most frequently in current public discussions are:

- The *Gendersternchen* or *Genderstern* [gender asterisk] as in *Teilnehmer*innen*. Just like its predecessor, the *Gendergap* or *Unterstrich* [low dash] as in *Teilnehmer_innen*, the asterisk has been introduced to question the binary construction of gender and to include persons of all genders explicitly. It is by far the most mentioned and discussed form in public debates.
- The *Gender-Doppelpunkt* [colon] as in *Teilnehmer:innen*—said to have the same function as the asterisk and the dash but is supposedly

4 According to Noack (2010: 40), the glottal stop is a usual sound and in the view of many linguists also a phoneme of German. She also points out that many German speakers have difficulties perceiving it and do not think of it as a sound as it is not represented in writing.

easier to decipher for screen readers and therefore put forward to ensure inclusion.
- The *Binnen-I* [word-internal I] as in *TeilnehmerInnen* is a much older form than the above-mentioned ones, already suggested in the 1980s and used a lot in Swiss German but today criticised by some for not including non-binary persons.
- The glottal stop, which is often discussed under the name of *Gender-Pause*.

## 3. Time frame and analysed materials

To compile a suitable corpus for a qualitative analysis, I have chosen to look more closely at one specific period when the debate flamed up in national and social media. In 2018, for the first time, the *Council for German Orthography* (*Rat für deutsche Rechtschreibung*) dealt with the question whether one or several of the above-described newer forms suggested to make German more gender-fair should be included in the official regulations on orthography.[5] In this context it is important to know that orthography is the only area of the German language where any form of language planning exists. If the council included one of the new forms into its orthographic guidelines, this form would consequently be considered correct written standard German. The council is an intergovernmental body with members from seven German-speaking countries and regions. It has the task to monitor written language use and to publish official regulations (see Rat für deutsche Rechtschreibung n. d.). In Germany, these regulations are valid in schools and administrative bodies. In all other areas and in the language use of individuals they merely function as guidelines (see Rat für deutsche Rechtschreibung 2018c).

A decision or a statement was expected in June 2018, but at that point the council only announced that further research was needed (see Rat für deutsche Rechtschreibung 2018b). In November 2018, the council finally published its decision not to include any new forms into the official regulations yet, but to continue to monitor written language use with regard to which

5 Although the Council only regulates orthography, the glottal stop is considered here, as both written and oral language use is discussed in the debates.

form might emerge as a new standard not only in Germany but in all German-speaking countries and regions (see Rat für deutsche Rechtschreibung 2018a).[6] In the media, the debate was often framed under the somewhat misleading question whether the gender asterisk was going to be included in the popular dictionary Duden, as this dictionary was used as the official standard until the controversial 1996 orthography reform and the foundation of the *Council for German Orthography*.

I have decided on covering this period in my investigation as it can be considered a *critical discourse moment*. The concept of *critical discourse moments* which was first used by Paul Chilton (1988) and then developed further by William A. Gamson (1992) can be defined as "time periods during which knowledge about a specific topic appears to be growing or changing" (Reynolds 2019: 57). The time frame thus reaches from the beginning of May to the end of the year 2018 with a special focus on the weeks preceding and following the publication of statements by the council, i. e. November 2018. As I was interested in debates, i.e. dialogical and argumentative negotiations of the topic, I looked at German Tweets evoking at least 5 answers in which one of the following words was used: *Genderstern*, *Gerndersternchen* or *gendern* (a verb used to indicate the use of gender-fair forms).[7] Thus, I found threads on the topic which were started by a tweet from a person or from a media outlet and reactions by other Twitter users. Among the initial tweets on the topic, I found positive, negative and neutral attitudes towards the use of gender-fair language. The query I entered in Twitter's advanced search on the 9th of August 2022 was *(Genderstern OR Gendersternchen OR gendern) min_replies:5 lang:de until:2018-12-31 since:2018-05-01 -filter:replies*.[8] My material consisted of 51 threads of which I chose 42 for a qualitative analysis because the topic was actually discussed in those threads and not just men-

**6** The council renewed this decision in March 2021, see Rat für deutsche Rechtschreibung (2021).

**7** The fact that I got many non-dialogical results, i. e. tweets without any reactions, in my first search after tweets on the topic suggests that one does not necessarily generate attention by introducing this topic.

**8** This is the link to the results: https://twitter.com/search?f=live&q=(Genderstern%20OR%20Gendersternchen%20OR%20gendern)%20min_replies%3A5%20lang%3Ade%20until%3A2018-12-31%20since%3A2018-05-01%20-filter%3Areplies&src=typed_query.

tioned in the initial tweet. The tweets received between 5 and 53 replies, so that I looked at a total of less than 723 tweets, because some tweets had been deleted or were not publicly available.

What needs to be kept in mind is that during recent years the fact that some inherent characteristics of social media contribute to the spread of hate speech and excessive language has been criticised and platforms have been forced by public opinion and by law to take measures against that effect. This is why some tweets are deleted after publication when they do not conform to the rules of the platform (see Twitter n.d.). Presumably, the most excessive forms of language have been deleted also in this debate—several deleted tweets or missing tweets by suspended accounts in the material suggested as much.

## 4. Analysis of the debate

In my analysis, I applied an inductive, qualitative approach in which I started out reading the material to get a first impression of which kinds of excessive language use were present. In the following qualitative analysis of the 42 Twitter threads, I focussed on the whole thread in a first step and on the initial tweet in a second step. I inductively analysed the threads regarding their excessiveness, looking for signs of possible excess and then categorising what I found. Thus, I sorted the threads into three categories of excessiveness:

1. Non-excessive, non-polemic threads, in which the language use was argumentative, friendly and polite.
2. (Partly) polemic threads: Threads bordering on excessiveness as authors of tweets made use of polemics by arguing against the person (*ad hominem*) or by using humour.
3. (Partly) excessive threads: Threads in which excessive language was used comprising vulgar language, pejorative language and/or insults.

In a second step, I categorised the initial tweets as neutral, positive or negative towards gender-fair language and as non-excessive, polemic or excessive in their language use. This I did to be able to find out whether these aspects had an influence on the excessiveness of the following thread. I also noted

whether it was posted by an individual or by a media outlet as this—after my first reading of the materials—seemed to have an effect.

Out of the 42 threads, there were only four threads that belonged to the first category, in which the climate of discussion was altogether argumentative, friendly and polite. A total of 22, i. e. approximately half of the threads, I placed in the second category as the use of language at least in some tweets was polemic or bordering on excessiveness. In 16 threats, i. e. a little more than a third, one or more users made use of clearly excessive language. This confirms the impression that the discussions on Twitter dealing with the topic of gender-fair language are heated and are predominantly not conducted in a polite tone. It must be said, however, that I did not carry out a quantitative analysis of all tweets. A majority of the polemic and excessive threads included polite and matter-of-fact tweets along with polemic and excessive ones; I classified only four threads as altogether polemic and excessive.

Among the initial tweets, there was no instance of excessiveness. A majority of 26 initial tweets was non-excessive, 16 of them I classified as polemic mostly because they made use of humour. The excessiveness in the debate thus starts with the replies, one could talk about "reactive excess". There is no clear pattern in which a rather extreme, in this case, polemic initial tweet would elicit an extreme, in this case polemic or excessive thread. Exactly half of the 26 non-excessive initial tweets resulted in excessive threads, 9 of them in polemic threads. Then again, polemic tweets mostly elicited polemic threads as the 16 polemic initial tweets evoked polemic threads in 13 cases and excessive threads only in three cases.

The only factor analysed that had a clear effect on the excessiveness of the following thread was whether the tweet was posted by an individual user or by a media outlet. Out of the 16 threads showing signs of excessiveness, only three were started by individual users. This was the case, even though threads started by individual users made up more than half (altogether 24) of the 42 threads.

What becomes especially clear when analysing these threads, is that despite of the dialogic format of statements (initial tweets) and answers (reactive tweets) which is sometimes repeated within a thread, the topic is not actually debated in Twitter as very few tweets are argumentative. There are only some instances of factual debate where arguments for or against gen-

der-fair language were exchanged. Only a few of the arguments against the case or *ad rem* to criticise and support gender-fair language, that can be found in other media, were also taken up explicitly in this context. I will only summarise these shortly, since my focus here is on the way the debate was held and not on the contents, and because argumentative language use was surprisingly absent. While proponents of gender-fair language gave as reason for their use of these forms the wish to include, represent and address everybody regardless of their gender, opponents argued that the male form was generic and therefore already included everybody. The latter also stressed that grammatical gender (*Genus*) and biological sex (*Sexus*) were different in nature (a fact that proponents of gender-fair language—in their adversaries' view—failed to understand). Moreover, opponents denounced the whole debate as unnecessary, this was "only language" and one should focus on more important topics instead. One more argument against gender-fair forms was the protection of the German language against interventions.[9]

### 4.1. Non-excessive threads

As mentioned above, only four non-excessive threads were found in the whole material. These were all started by individuals posting a non-excessive tweet that was positive towards gender-fair language. The users started a discussion on a specific aspect of the topic, for example which symbol should be used for aesthetic or other reasons, with a statement or a question.[10] A couple of other apparently supportive users shared their experiences and thoughts and the thread ended after not more than 9 answers. Only in one case, a comment that was obviously critical towards gender-fair language was added at the very end of the thread, but ignored—presumably also because it appeared much later than all the other posts.[11]

Although this sample is very small, it shows that the topic can be discussed on Twitter in a matter-of-fact way among individual proponents of

9 For a more detailed account of the arguments or topoi used, especially in the debate among linguists, see for example Reisigl & Spieß (2017); Diewald (2018).

10 See, for example, https://twitter.com/notknut/status/1019623344096862211 (24 February 2023).

11 See https://twitter.com/VictoriaHamburg/status/1055440283171782656 (24 February 2023).

gender-fair language. It must be noted though that none of the authors of the initial tweets added a hashtag to the words *Gendern* or *Gendersternchen*, so that their tweets were difficult to find or come across by chance.

## 4.2. (Partly) polemic threads

A little more than half of the threads comprised polemic language use. Polemics can be described as a linguistic[12] procedure that makes use of all kinds of modes of argumentation as well as of all kinds of rhetorical tropes to stage a fight (see Lundström 2015: 77). In my use of the concept, I will focus on three aspects that are typical for polemic debates and distinguish them from argumentative debates. One aspect is humour (see Haßlauer 2010: 21). The second aspect is that arguments against the person (*ad hominem* or *ad personam*) are used alongside arguments against the case (*ad rem*) (see Lundström 2015: 69; Haßlauer 2010: 16). The third aspect is the already mentioned public and staged nature of the fight. Because of their (partly) public nature, social media, especially Twitter, are a good forum for this and it is not surprising that many exchanges on Twitter make use of polemic strategies. While arguments against the case are usually seen as appropriate and polite, arguments against the person as well as the act of making fun of persons and/or their actions, words or convictions, can be seen as paving the way to excessive speech or as excessive in themselves.

All the threads classified as polemic contained at least one instance of a humorous tweet, many were made up of humorous tweets altogether. Whether the thread was started by a tweet that was critical towards or supportive of gender-fair language did not make any difference and the distribution between these two was almost even. Many polemic threads were started by individuals and already the initial tweet made use of humour. One example of a humorous thread was started by an opponent of gender-fair language, who proposed to make Zodiac signs gender-fair.[13] Other users reacted with posting suggestions of and questions on possible forms. This thread and many more contain the most typical pattern for humour in the debate, used exclusively by opponents: the use of wordplay with gender-fair forms which

12 Linguistic is used here as an adjective for language, not for linguistics.
13 See https://twitter.com/beckstown78/status/1029316747420160000 (24 February 2023).

exaggerates and ridicules gender-fair language (see examples 1, 4 and 5 in the following). Another thread, initiated by a polemic tweet of a proponent of gender-fair language actually targeted this pattern.[14] In both the thread on Zodiac signs and the one that targeted the humour pattern, the respective group of opponents or proponents kept to themselves exchanging humorous tweets.

In very few instances, proponents and opponents interacted in polemic exchange. After an initial tweet in which the author critically commented on the form *Verkehrsteilnehmer.innen* [persons participating in traffic][15] with a dot inserted between the root and the female ending, which was new to them, a user replied with the typical humorous pattern of the opponents, exaggerating the form:

> 1. "Das ist doch nichts gegen VerkehrsteilnehmerI*xnen" (@Lenn-Star_de, 28 May 2018, 6:48 pm)
> ["This is nothing against VerkehrsteilnehmerI*xnen"]

The author referred to the asterisk, the word-internal I and the x-form which have been suggested as gender-neutral and inclusive variants independently of each other, but used them at the same time, adding and deleting letters rather randomly, thereby creating a form that is hard to read and to pronounce in order to show that gender-fair language is impractical (and ridiculous). Then, a second person answered:

> 2. "Das würde ja auch Verkehrsteilnehmxs heißen ^^ Stümper…" (@H3rmi, 28 May 2018, 8:40 pm)
> ["After all, that would be Verkehrsteilnehmxs ^^ bungler…"]

This person mockingly criticised the first user with the appellation *bungler* (using the double caret smiley to express cheerfulness) and corrected them

**14** See https://twitter.com/BarbaraKaufmann/status/1000280223886258176 (24 February 2023).

**15** See https://twitter.com/mmarsching/status/1001119112255496192 (8 March 2023). All translations from German into English: H. A.

with the actually suggested x-form, in which an -x is added to the root of the verb to form a gender-neutral appellation and an -s for a plural form. Although a similar exchange could very possibly also be part of a play with forms among opponents, the fact that the second person used the x-form according to the way it has been suggested makes me assume that they do support gender-fair language. The seemingly mocking *bungler* can then be interpreted as a polemic argument *ad hominem* or against the person.

More often, polemic arguments *ad hominem* did not target persons actually present and involved in the debate. Instead, users formulated their critique more generally as in the following examples:

> 3. "es soll menschen mit wenig oder keinem selbstbewußtsein geben, die brauchen eine explizite 'sichtbarmachung', damit sie ihr ego aufgewertet aka 'sich mitgemeint fühlen'." (@vertig0nix, 3 Nov 2018, 7:09 pm)
> ["there's supposed to be people with little or no self-confidence who need an explicit 'making visible' so that they can enhance their ego aka 'also be referred to'"]

Both *Sichtbarmachung* [making visible] and *mitgemeint* [also be referred to], put into quotation marks by the author, are typical phrases used in the debate associated with the proponents' side. The author of example 3 thus insinuated that the reason why women or diverse people adhere to gender-fair language is their lack of self-confidence.

The next example is also typical in the respect that many tweets made use of implicitness both by utilising implicit language but also by incorporating visual elements as in the following case (see figure 1 for the German original):

> 4. "Asterix! These … are crazy!" "Yes, I know" (@Markus_Wojahn, 17 Nov 2018, 11:27 pm)

> 5."… Romans [gender-fair form with an asterisk]" (@jsb16850331, 19 Nov 2018, 8:52 pm)


**Figure 1: Humorous tweets from opponents and proponents of gender-fair language.**

An opponent of gender-fair language made the implicit suggestion that proponents of gender-fair language are crazy (see section 4.3.1. below for more excessive versions of this pattern) using a panel from the comic Asterix. A proponent reacted just as humorously by suggesting the insertion of a gender-fair form into the quote.

Both implicitness and vagueness about the exact recipient of polemic arguments *ad hominem* are typical for the analysed debate. This can partly be explained by the rules of conduct of the media and by legal bindings which forbid harassment of or hateful conduct, insults and threats towards individuals or groups of people. Posts including direct insults might be deleted on Twitter (Twitter n.d.). Vagueness can be a strategy to avoid restrictions while still targeting others. This also holds true in the threads categorised as excessive.

### 4.3. (Partly) excessive threads

The language use in 16 of the analysed threads went beyond implicit and explicit humoristic mocking and polemics and could be termed excessive because it was vulgar, pejorative or directly insulting. The rejection of gender-fair language was at times expressed using vulgar language, for example:

> 6. "Ihr könnt mich mal ganz genüsslich am Arsch lecken. Ich spreche deutsch, wie ich es als Kind gelernt habe. Kein Sternchen, keinen Binnen-I, nichts. Männliche und weibliche Substantive. Fertig." (@WhiteNOld, 21 May 2018, 3:44 pm)
> ["You can kiss my ass with pleasure. I speak German the way I learned it as a child. No asterisk, no word-internal I, nothing. Male and female nouns. Done."]

This was posted as an answer to a tweet by the official account of the daily newspaper *Welt* which linked to a video informing readers about the upcoming meeting of the *Council for German Orthography* in which it said "Geschlechtsneutral: Gendersternchen könnte in den Duden kommen." (@welt, 20 May 2018, 9:23 pm) ["Gender-neutral: Gender asterisk could be added to the Duden dictionary"]. The initial tweet, posted by an institution, was thus non-excessive and neutral towards the topic. The user in question did not only reject gender-fair language like others in the same thread with a simple "no" (for example @TIMECODEX, 20 May 2018, 9:33 pm) but asked "them" to "kiss their ass with pleasure". Again, there is vagueness about the recipient of the remark: Whom exactly did the user want to address (the newspaper *Welt*, the dictionary publisher *Duden*, all proponents of gender-fair language)?

Vulgar language use was not predominant in the excessive examples from the materials, and it can be noted that only opponents of gender-fair language made use of vulgarity. More often, different kinds of pejorative language use could be detected. Pejorative language use is a form of linguistic violence used to downgrade and discriminate against individuals and groups of people. In my understanding of pejorative speech, I refer to Hornscheidt's (2011) concept of *Pejorisierung* (i. e. the act of pejoration). Hornscheidt (they) explains pejoration as "gesellschaftlich relevante sprachliche Handlungen der Diskriminierung" (Hornscheidt 2011: 17) ["socially relevant linguistic

acts of discrimination"]. They thus distinguish between a more traditional understanding of insults as linguistic acts in which a speaker intends to insult and/or an addressee feels insulted, on the one hand, and the concept of pejoration as linguistic acts in which not only the intentions of speakers, the interpretations of addressees (and possible other hearers), but also the structural dimension of discrimination plays a role, on the other hand. They also stress the fact that—in the constructivist understanding of pejoration—individuals or groups of people do not possess certain characteristics and are degraded because of them. In contrast, pejorative speech acts create the degradation and discrimination which can then become conventionalised. One important function of pejoratives in societies is thus to delimit what is considered normal and what is considered deviant. As pejoration does not lie in the meaning of certain words or in the intentions of the speakers but arises in context (partly because of histories of structural discrimination), the reactions of the addressee(s) and/or other hearer(s) can change the pejorative force of utterances—also in communication that takes place later, in other media and other spaces as Scharloth (2018: 9) emphasises. Accordingly, Cepollaro (2017) suggests reacting to slurs by making their implicit derogatory content explicit and rejecting it. She quotes an example from the training of a LGBTQ-rights organisation which shows how the reaction of hearers/addressees interferes with the normalising of—in this case—heterosexuality and the degradation of homosexuality through a pejorative utterance: "What you just said was really inappropriate because you are implying that there is something wrong with being gay or lesbian when there isn't" (quoted in Cepollaro 2017).

The most recurring kind of pejoration in the analysed material was mental illness. Furthermore, there were some occurrences of other kinds of pejoration, namely mental capacity, anti-Islamic racism, sexism, antisemitism and body shaming. I will continue with describing these one after the other.

### 4.3.1 The mental illness pattern

Even beyond the analysed material, a recurring pattern in the utterances of opponents of gender-fair language is the evocation of mental illness. Some examples include:

7. "Total bekloppt, bekloppter geht es nicht mehr." (@bnapierala75, 17 May 2018, 8:14 pm)
["Totally nutty, it doesn't get any nuttier than this."]

8. "Stimmt, dieses kranke Gegender vergewaltigt unsere Sprache" (@dl4go, 2 Jun 2018, 11:59 am)
["That's right, this sick gendering is raping our language"]

9. "Epoche der Geisteskranken" (@Clanhub_24, 22 Nov 2018, 1:00 pm
["Era of the insane"]

10. "die Genderwahnsinnigen" (@bread5z, 16 Nov 2018, 4:19 pm
["gender maniacs"]

These appellations united all proponents of gender-fair language into one group and declared them mad. They reproduced mental illness as a deviation and mental health as the norm. Thus, the appellations had the effect of locating the adversaries outside of norms for appropriate behaviour in society and delegitimising their cause without arguing against it at the content level.

In the case of gender-fair language, the madness pattern used by opponents needs to be seen in context with societal developments in the understanding and categorisation of gender. Whereas transsexuality and gender identities beyond male and female have in the past often been seen and classified as mental disorders, it has become usual in recent years to stress that people with diverse gender identities suffer from societal stigma and not from mental illness. In May 2018, i. e. during the analysed time period of this study, the *World Health Organisation* announced that it is going to remove gender identity disorder from its list of mental illnesses in the *International Classification of Diseases* (see Hütten 2018; World Health Organization 2019). Opponents of gender-fair language who made use of such arguments, pejoratives and insults, thus evoked a pattern in which gender identity and mental illness are seen as connected, reinforcing the stigma that WHO and others are trying to address and subsuming all proponents of gender-fair language under this label. There is one instance in the material, where a user explicitly questioned gender-fair language by stating that persons with gender iden-

tities which do not confirm with the male/female binary norm should get psychological help, so that there would be no need of gender-fair linguistic forms anymore.[16]

While examples 7–10 remained vague in as to whom they addressed, there were some examples where the mental illness pattern was used in insults directed at specific persons, in my sample at a journalist and at the then Minister of Justice—both of whom were women who had publicly spoken in favour of gender-fair language. The thread in which the journalist was insulted, started with the official account of the online newspaper *Zeit Online* providing a link to their own article on the topic of gender-fair language and mentioning that the author of the article had been nominated for a journalist award (*Deutscher Reporterpreis*). The following thread is especially excessive and consists predominantly of vulgar, polemic and pejorative tweets by opponents of gender-fair language. Quite at the end of the discussion, a user wrote:

> 11. "Ab in die Irrenanstalt. Den #Reporterpreis (oder Reporterinnenpreisin) kann sie ggf. mitnehmen und auf ihr Nachtschränkchen stellen, damit sie jemand hat, mit dem* *der sie reden kann. 🤪🤪🤪" (@Boulevard_77, 22 Nov 2018, 5:43 pm)
> ["Off to the loony bin. She can take the #ReporterAward (or ReporterinnenPreisin) with her if she wants and put it on her bedside cabinet so that she has someone [male pronoun* *female pronoun] to talk to. 🤪🤪🤪"]

This user reproduced the pattern in which proponents of gender-fair language were categorised as mentally ill and their case was delegitimised and included humoristic wordplay. The journalist was personally declared mad when the user suggested sending her to a psychiatric clinic and further implied that she will not be visited when they recommended taking the award as company. For the award (as a distinction and as company) they used fake-fair forms.

The other thread was started by an individual, Frank Pasemann, who was at that point a member of parliament for *Alternative für Deutschland*. He pro-

16 See https://twitter.com/zeitonline/status/1063453302149586944 (24 February 2023).

vided a link to a daily newspaper article from the Berlin-based *Tagesspiegel* which reported that social democratic Minister of Justice and Pasemann's colleague in parliament, Katarina Barley, had taken a stance for the gender asterisk with a polemic tweet, in which he used the minister's twitter handle "@katarinabarley" so that the tweet would be visible for her.[17] In two replies which also reached Barley through her handle, she was denounced as mentally ill.

### 4.3.2. The mental capacity pattern

While the mental illness pattern only appeared in the arguments against gender-fair language, both proponents and opponents of gender-fair language used pejorative language by means of which mental capacity, i. e. being intelligent and capable in the use of one's brain, was constructed as a societal norm and the lack of mental capacity as a deviation. In example 12, an opponent questioned gender studies and—as becomes clear from the context—implicitly also gender-fair language as ideological, equating gender studies with national socialist race doctrine. As an answer, in 13, a proponent started with an explanation of what gender studies stand for in their view but ended with accusing the first user and others like them of being stupid.

> 12. "Gender-Studies sind die zeitgenössische Entsprechung zur Rassenlehre der Nazis. Genauso unwissenschaftlich und ideologisch." (@R____B____, 22 Dec 2018, 11:35 am)
> ["Gender studies are the contemporary equivalent to national socialist race doctrine. Just as unscientific and ideological."]

> 13. "Gender-studies fordern nur, dass Menschen außerhalb des binär-gender-'spektrums' als solche anerkannt werden. Sprich: Sie sind gegen Diskriminierung. Wie kann man das mit der NS-Ideologie vergleichen?? Seid ihr wirklich so dumm?" (@yyyxaM, 22 Dec 2018, 12:21 pm)

17 See https://twitter.com/Frank_Pasemann/status/998195191755440129 (24 February 2023). On the function of twitter handles, see Stefanowitsch (2020: 191).

["Gender studies only demand that humans beyond the binary gender 'spectrum' are accepted as humans. Meaning: they are against discrimination. How can one compare this with national socialist ideology?? Are you [plural] really that stupid?"]

Using the plural form might be a way of avoiding direct confrontation as if not one specific user was addressed, but a group of people with similar opinions. Nevertheless, accusing someone of stupidity can be considered an insult as well as a pejorative speech act which discriminates against people because they are categorised according to their alleged mental capacity. In the same thread, an opponent also made use of the mental capacity pattern combining it with wordplay. The same proponent of gender-fair language reacted again with an explanation and by insinuating stupidity once more:

14. "Einfach mal das Hirn einschalten." (@yyyxaM, 22 Dec 2018, 12:16 pm)
["Just switch on the brain."]

Examples 13 and 14—posted by the same individual user—stand for the most excessive uses of language by a proponent of gender-fair language in my sample as they included both pejorisation and a direct insult of an opponent. All in all, there are only a handful of tweets by proponents that were in any way excessive, for example, because they included the mental capacity pattern or unfriendly comments. Also opponents made use of the mental capacity pattern in a handful of tweets, examples include 15 and 16:

15. "Genau: Idioten, Idiotinnen und Idiot*innen." (@Fotofan04, 21 Nov 2018, 9:13 pm)
["Exactly: idiots [masculine form], idiots [feminine form] and idiots [gender-fair form]."]

16. "Man sollte Schwachsinn nicht kommentieren noch mitmachen." (@Helfengerard1, 3 Jun 2018, 10:00 am)
["One shouldn't comment on idiocy/bullshit nor participate in it."]

The normalisation of intelligence or that which is sometimes termed 'common sense' ["gesunder Menschenverstand"] (for example @NataschaHamburg, 15 Nov 2018, 11:04 pm) while at the same time devaluating a lack of intelligence is a rarely questioned pattern in society even beyond the analysed debate.

### 4.3.3. Further excess on topics like anti-Islamic racism, sexism, anti-semitism and body shaming

In one of the analysed threads on Twitter, users abandoned the topic of gender-fair language and continued by uttering anti-Islamic and racist pejorative statements in rather implicit ways. The thread was started by a tweet in which the nationalist and conservative weekly newspaper *Junge Freiheit* posted a link to their own article which reported on an interview in *Der Spiegel* with the main editor of the dictionary office of the Duden publishing house, Kathrin Kunkel-Razum, on gender-fair language. All users took a critical stance towards gender-fair language, marking it as a non-existing problem and denouncing its proponents using the mental illness and mental capacity patterns. Some reacted to a statement in which Kunkel-Razum reflected on women experiencing discrimination for example through lower wages later in life and not when they are young.

> 17. "Super Luxusproblem sich mit solchen Bullshit-Pseudothemen zu befassen mit der fadenscheinigen Begründung der Diskriminierung, diese muss aktuell für alles herhalten beginnend bei den dauererregten Moslems bis hin zu bipolaren Störungen schizophrener Drogenfreaks." (@peter_glaser1, 16 Nov 2018, 5:59 pm)
> ["It is a super luxury problem to deal with such bullshit pseudo-topics on the flimsy grounds of discrimination, which is currently used for everything from permanently aroused Muslims to the bipolar disorders of schizophrenic drug freaks."]

> 18. "Auch alles kein Problem! Unsere immer bunter werdende Gesellschaft sorgt schon dafür, dass Frauen in naher Zukunft regelmäßig ihre Diskriminierungserfahrung bekommen… Hätte hier jetzt irgendwo nen Sternchen sein müssen? Bin mir bei diesem Blödsinn nicht so sicher." (@Raute000000, 16 Nov 2018, 6:23 pm)

> ["No problem at all either! Our increasingly colourful society already makes sure that women will regularly experience discrimination in the near future... Should there have been an asterisk somewhere here now? I'm not so sure about this nonsense."]

> 19. "Wenn sich der Islam weiter ausbreitet, werden die Diskriminierungserfahrungen schon noch kommen." (@steffbird1, 17 Nov 2018, 11:18 am)
> ["If Islam continues to spread, the experiences of discrimination will come."]

All three tweet authors downplayed the discrimination that women in Germany still experience and, for that purpose, invoked the racist-sexist discursive pattern of black or brown men as perpetrators of sexual violence. This pattern has a long transnational history, which has been described by scholars from many disciplines, to give some examples: from a sociological perspective by Iris Wigger (2007, 2019), from the perspective of communication studies by Tracey Owens Patton and Julie Snyder-Yuly (2007), from psychology by Audrey K. Miller (2019), from gender studies by Sujata Moorti (2002), from literature studies by Robert Nowatzki (1994) and from cultural studies by Gabriele Dietze (2016). Events which have formed the particular German version of this pattern were the propagandistic and racist campaign against black French soldiers during the occupation of the Rhineland in 1920 (see Lebzelter 1985; Wigger 2007) as well as the so called "Cologne New Year's Eve" (Dietze 2016; Wigger 2019; Wigger et al. 2022). On New Year's Eve 2015/16, groups of young men, many of them—as was confirmed much later—refugees from North African countries, committed hundreds of sexual assaults, thefts and violent offences around the main station in Cologne. The scale of the offences only became clear after a couple of days, but the message to be learned seemed clear from the beginning. In an analysis of the discourse in the aftermath of the event, Dietze writes:

> Obwohl also die das Ereignis Köln konstituierenden Elemente vage und disparat sind, scheint ihre Botschaft klar und ihr Wahrheitsgehalt unbestreitbar: 'Die Bürgerkriegs-Flüchtlinge sind gefährlich für deutsche Frauen, die Flüchtlinge müssen wieder weg'. (Dietze 2016: 93)

> [Although the elements constituting the Cologne event are vague and disparate, their messages seem clear and their truth value unquestionable: 'The refugees from the civil war(s) are dangerous to German women, the refugees need to leave'.]

In her article, Dietze (2016) shows how racism and sexism are intertwined in the interpretation of the event and how the fight against sexism, and for gender inequality and homosexual rights is implicitly presented as successfully concluded in Germany (or "the West" in general) by means of the representation of Muslim individuals and refugees as a danger to the emancipated German woman. Especially examples 18 and 19 from my material used this pattern in the way described above by insinuating that women will be "discriminated against" (which can be translated into sexually assaulted) as a direct result of the immigration of Muslim and non-white individuals. There can be no excuses made for the perpetrators on New Year's Eve 2015/16 in Cologne. At the same time, it must be made clear that there is no statistic or causal relationship between the immigration of Muslim individuals and sexual harassment of women in Germany, as for example a statement by the German National crime agency made clear in 2016 (see Wigger 2019: 266). The author of example 17 strongly questioned current discrimination and not only referred to Muslims, but also stirred up prejudice against drug addicts.

Here as well, the excessiveness of language remained rather implicit, presumably also to avoid the deletion of the respective tweets. None of the authors openly referred to sexual assaults or went as far as to call Muslims rapists. Instead, the presuppositions of their statements, i. e. the unspoken knowledge that is necessary for understanding their statements, carried the pejorative force. Anja Lobenstein-Reichmann has described how presuppositions can function as a linguistic pattern to degrade and to insult (see Scharloth 2018: 13). All three tweet authors (of examples 17–19) left it to the readers to establish the connection to the discursive pattern.

I would like to name two more instances of excess to show that extreme forms like antisemitism and personal insults do appear in the material. Nevertheless, I will not describe them in any detail here so as not to unnecessarily reproduce the pejorative language in them. One author used the mental illness pattern to delegitimise gender-fair language and then posted a gen-

derist and antisemitic image.[18] Another opponent tried to silence the author of a polemic initial tweet by personally insulting them with a body-shaming comment—and was ignored.[19]

## 5. Conclusions

To summarising my findings: I found that in the context of the treatment of the topic of gender-fair language by the *Council of German Orthography* in 2018, the debate on Twitter was partly conducted using excessive language. Polite exchanges of arguments did take place but were very limited. Overall, arguments were rather hinted at than formulated in detail or exchanged between people of different opinions. Individuals used the medium Twitter mostly to take a stance on the topic of gender-fair language by resorting to polemic, especially humorous statements but also by pejorative, discriminative statements and direct insults.

The excessiveness of the analysed debate can be described as "reactive excess", since initial tweets on the topic of gender-fair language were never outright excessive. Media outlets usually posted a non-excessive and neutral tweet in which they marketed their own article or video, whereas individuals posted both non-excessive and polemic tweets in which they expressed their negative or positive opinion on the topic. Excessiveness then started in the replies contained in the threads, mostly in the replies to the neutral tweets of the media outlets and to a lesser degree in the replies to polemic tweets of individual users. It can thus be concluded that excessiveness is much more common in commercially started threads than in individually or privately started ones. It is true that one reason for this could of course be that opponents and proponents are more likely to keep to themselves in individually started threads than in those started by media outlets, since individuals might have a politically more homogenous group of followers. The circumstance that opponents and proponents often stayed among themselves in the polemic and humorous threads, confirms this assumption. In the few instances of interaction between opponents and proponents, the interaction could be mocking from both sides, sometimes explanatory from the side of

18 See, https://twitter.com/heuteplus/status/1063108113681801216 (24 February 2023).
19 See, https://twitter.com/habibitus/status/1032307228949266433 (24 February 2023).

the proponents. In two instances (examples 13 and 14), one and the same proponent made use of direct insults of opponents by insinuating a lack of mental capacity. This was the most excessive use of language by a proponent of gender-fair language in the analysed tweets.

Opponents made much more and more varied use of excessive language: They sometimes made use of vulgar language. They often accused proponents of being mentally ill, thus reproducing mental health as a societal norm and discriminating against mentally ill individuals as well as individuals with gender identities other than male and female. They sometimes also insinuated a lack of mental capacity. In the most extreme cases, they directly and vehemently insulted individual public figures and in one case even another Twitter user. In a few tweets, opponents uttered or hinted at anti-Islamic, racist, sexist and anti-Semitic discursive patterns. All in all, the linguistic excess often stayed on an implicit level, and it remained vague whom insults were directed at. Presumably, such use of language is part of a strategy to avoid deletion of tweets and legal consequences.

My study permitted a detailed and qualitative look at one critical discourse moment. Further research into the excessiveness of this debate should include quantitative approaches which would analyse much bigger samples and time frames and, at the same time, establish the proportions of excessive tweets, and find out whether they are being posted by a limited number of users. Moreover, further important insights could be provided by comparisons between the form of the debate on social media with that on other media.

Nevertheless, it can be concluded from my analysis that the way the debate is conducted on Twitter—especially by those who reject gender-fair language—affects the irreconcilability of opponents and proponents in a negative way. Several commentators on the German discussions on gender-fair language have called for a less agitated debate and expressed their hope that more research on the topic will contribute to calm the polarised exchange (see for example Simon 2022; Müller-Spitzer 2022; Acke & Pohl 2022). I agree with this call for an open exchange of arguments, but I am also faced with a dilemma. My agreement with a call for open exchange is based on the result of this analysis. In large parts of this debate the discussants were not dedicated to an open-minded exchange of arguments and opinions. Especially the threads initiated by official accounts of media outlets like newspapers and

broadcasting stations triggered agitated, even excessive posts in which the users seldomly interacted with each other. This confirmed the assumption—that some users also uttered[20]—that the topic is often introduced to attract attention and not to initiate a debate. As shown above, threads initiated by individuals' accounts were overall less agitated and sometimes included exchanges of opinions.

The dilemma I am faced with as a researcher concerns the circumstance that my analysis of the debate which—among other results—came to the conclusion that the opponents were more excessive in their language use can easily be brushed aside by these opponents because, in their view I am one of the "gender maniacs" as well, who, as another often repeated argument (that does not figure in my sample) claims: are blinded by ideology and therefore cannot take a reality-oriented view.[21] My standpoint is that all researchers—just as all human beings—are always ideological as "[t]here is no 'view from nowhere,' no gaze that is not positioned." (Irvine & Gal 2000: 36) or as Posch, Stopfner and Kienpointner state:

> it is not possible to distinguish between 'mere ideology' and 'objective truth' because all standpoints and positions are based on an ideology of some kind (Posch et al. 2013: 103)

The challenge is that only one side in this debate believes in this circumstance—or is sincere (or naive?) enough to admit it. Nevertheless, the best suggestion seems to be to call for a more open, more argumentative and, this I would like to add, a more personal and emotional debate, in which people's own expectations, wishes, fears and beliefs about language are made explicit. To make this possible, we need to either change social media and use them differently, or we need to find or revive other media for constructive public debates. N

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20 See https://twitter.com/zeitonline/status/1003167224817909760 (24 February 2023).
21 See for example several user comments on the online newspaper article by Matthias Heine (2018), also linked to in my Twitter sample.

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