

2011 RICHARD FRUCHT MEMORIAL STUDENT CONFERENCE
UNDERGRADUATE PAPER WINNER

ON AND OFF THE PAGE:
THE “MALE AS NORM” IDEOLOGY OF ENGLISH AND GERMAN

Barbara L. Hilden

This paper examines the linguistic representation of male and female. Comparing German and English, this paper argues that, despite the grammatically gendered nature of German, both languages equally privilege the male element at the expense of the female. Referencing a variety of studies, this paper explores the use—in both languages—of the “generic he,” investigating how this custom is perceived by listeners; it examines marked terms, particularly the apparent need to mark female appearance in male-dominated professional spheres; it considers female visibility in language and the differing approaches taken by both English and German; and it explores feminine derivation and the semantic sexualization/degradation of the female form to male counterparts. Derivation from masculine norms as well as lexical and connotative gender are briefly discussed. Finally, the paper looks at each language’s strategies for correction.

“A woman’s place is in the home,” but *Wo die Frau regiert den Mann, da ist der Teufel Hauskaplan* ‘Where the woman reigns over the man, there the devil is house chaplain’. Neither of these maxims remain in significant use today, but their vestigial presences in English and in German belie the underlying belief in what Hadumod Bußmann and Marlis Hellinger (2003, 158) have termed “the ideology of MAN”: the privilege of the male and simultaneous trivialization of the female. Both languages uphold the male standard, while the female and feminine elements of language are derived from, and marginalized to, this norm.

This inequality manifests itself both covertly and overtly. A grammatically gendered language, German marks female, male, and neutral genders of nouns. This paper will examine some of the ways in which this lexical gender affects perceptions and representations of actual gender. English, though grammatically genderless, also frequently marks linguistically female and male nouns; this paper will examine some of these gendered words and the effects of this practice on the representation of women. Both languages demonstrate a male-centric philosophy through

a variety of linguistic preferences and terminology which subtly but systematically reinforce the idea of “male as norm”: some of these practices and consequences will be also be explored. Finally, the strategies—and the relative effectiveness of each—employed for correcting this ideology will be considered. As a woman who has lived, worked, and studied within each of these linguistic communities, is proficient in one language and conversant in the other, and focuses her study on the confluence of culture and language, female visibility in these two languages is of great interest.

USE OF “GENERIC HE”

Both English and German generally nominalize a sentence containing a singular, gender-unknown referent in the masculine. *He* (in German, *-er*) is intended in these instances to be gender-neutral; hearing a statement such as, “Someone forgot his book,” an individual is supposed to understand that the sentence refers not only to males but rather encompasses both sexes. While the speaker’s intention may be gender-neutral reference, however, the reality is that hearers seldom interpret it so. In *Language, Culture,*

Undergraduate student; Departments of Anthropology and Modern Languages & Cultural Studies,
University of Alberta

Author contact: bhilden@ualberta.ca

DIVERSIPEDE, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 16-21, 2011

and *Communication*, Nancy Bonvillain (2008) cites several experiments by Donald MacKay which indicate that *he*, despite generic intentions, is often perceived to refer to males exclusively. In one study, 95% of respondents (10 men, 10 women) judged such sentences as “When a botanist is in the field, he is usually working” as exclusively male referential (Bonvillain 2008, 215). When the sentence was re-phrased to omit the male pronoun, as in, “A botanist who is in the field is usually working,” only 43% of respondents deemed the sentences exclusively male referential (Bonvillain 2008, 215). Since *he* often does refer to a singular male, there is an inherent uncertainty to the sentence: the botanist in question could be a man. Problems arise when a female subject is intended to be included in the generic *he*, as MacKay’s research reveals that, in practice, few hearers interpret a female referent.

German uses the generic male referent in a similar fashion, usually preferring to pronominalize unknown gender in the masculine. As a gendered language, however, German marks gender not only with pronouns and articles, but also with nouns, adjectives, and suffixes, thereby increasing the “visibility” of the referenced gender in any given sentence. While an English sentence such as “Every voter should exercise his right to vote,” contains only one overtly masculine reference, the same sentence in German, *Jeder Wähler sollte von seinem Stimmrecht Gebrauch machen* marks the masculine referent three times: on *Jeder* ‘every (m)’, as the suffix *-er* agrees with masculine gendered *Wähler* ‘voter (m)’, and finally on *seinem* ‘his (m)’ (Bußmann and Hellinger 2003, 158). While *Wähler* ‘voter’ may be intended to include both males and females, the prescribed use of the masculine generic supports the male standard and “considers the male/masculine as the higher, more prestigious category and the female/feminine as secondary and subordinate” (Bußmann and Hellinger 2003, 158). In concordance with MacKay’s results, Bußmann and Hellinger (2003, 160) found that, in German, “masculine terms automatically trigger expectations as to a most suitable (perhaps prototypically)—male—representative of the noun.”

Researchers Braun, Sczesny, and Stahlberg

(2005) further support the idea that masculine generics are, in reality, anything but generic. In their paper “Cognitive effects of masculine generics in German,” they investigated the effects of the male generic on the “cognitive inclusion of women” (Braun, Sczesny, and Stahlberg 2005, 1). Asked to name their favourite fictional hero, participants were presented with three differently formed options—one masculine gendered: *Romanheld* ‘hero in a novel (m)’; one feminine: *Romanheldin* ‘hero in a novel (f)’; and one neuter: *heldenhafte Romanfigur* ‘heroic character in a novel’. Masculine gendered prompts, repeatedly and overwhelmingly, elicited male-only responses (Braun, Sczesny, and Stahlberg 2005, 10). Feminine and neuter formations elicited significantly more female responses, prompting researchers to conclude, “the masculine thus seems to be the least suitable type of generic to make readers think of or imagine women” (Braun, Sczesny, and Stahlberg 2005, 10).

Gender-neutral and/or gender-unknown references are seldom made with female pronouns. The exclusive use of the masculine reference reinforces the idea of “male as norm,” an idea that Hellinger and Bußmann (2001) believe has extensive negative effects. In “Gender across languages,” they write that the selection of male expressions as the normal, unmarked case results in female invisibility, “which in turn creates expectations about appropriate female and male behaviour” (Hellinger and Bußmann 2001, 10). At best, favouring male-biased pronouns creates what Hellinger and Bußmann (2001, 10) call “referential ambiguities and misunderstandings”; at worst, as Bonvillain (2008, 217) asserts, use of the male pronoun helps to “reinforce cultural evaluations that enhance males’ status and disvalue females’.”

MARKED TERMS

The appearance of women in traditionally male-dominated spheres is noted in both languages. Deviation from “stereotypical assumptions about what are appropriate social roles for women and men” are formally and overtly marked (Hellinger and Bußmann 2001, 11). Men-

tion of women in a professional capacity requires special attention, as in the terms *working mother*, *career woman*, and *female executive*. A male equivalent, such as *working father*, is unheard of, suggesting that “men by definition have careers, but women who do so must be marked as deviant” (Romaine 2001, 170). The term *family man* further supports this idea, marking as noteworthy a man who spends time with his family. The absence of a parallel female term such as *family woman* suggests that a woman’s place is with her family, that “women are by definition family women” (Romaine 2001, 170).

German marks female gender by modifying masculine nouns with *weiblich* ‘female’. This strategy may be utilized independently or in tandem with the feminizing suffix *-in*; in both instances, as in English, it occurs “where female participation is the exception” (Bußmann and Hellinger 2003, 160). Catherine David, for example, was named “*erster weiblicher documenta-Chef...*” ‘first female director (m) of the [art exhibition]...’ (Bußmann and Hellinger 2003, 160). Inserting *weiblich* ‘female’ can serve to clarify a grammatically masculine noun and mark the referent as female: *der weibliche Korrespondent* ‘the (m) female correspondent (m)’. This practice, however, is less favourable than feminizing the masculine gendered noun with the *-in* suffix, possibly in addition to amending it with *weiblich* ‘female’ (Leue 2000, 166). Marking an already feminine gendered noun in this fashion further emphasizes the female gender of the referent: *die erste weibliche Korrespondentin* ‘the (f) first (f) female correspondent (f)’. In all instances, however, whether amending, clarifying, or emphasizing, *weiblich* ‘female’ serves to mark the female presence as unusual, as deviation from the expected male as norm.

FEMALE VISIBILITY

English and German share a preponderance of masculine references in professional spheres. Attempts, in English, to increase female visibility by changing *-man* endings to a gender-neutral form have been largely unsuccessful. As concerns over the “symbolic preference for males expressed covertly and overtly by words

such as *man*” have increased, proponents have advocated changing to “genuinely neutral forms such as *person*” (Bonvillain 2008, 216). Thus, *chairman* has been replaced with *chairperson*, *spokesman* with *spokesperson*. However, in practice, the usage of these two forms remains distinct. There is, Bonvillain (2008, 216) writes, “a tendency to restrict *-person* nouns to females, retaining *-man* for males.” In effect, *chairperson* has become a new marked term, used to refer to women, while *chairman* still retains its generic and masculine references.

German has been more successful at increasing female presence in language. Many of the *-mann* ‘-man’ ending words, such as *Kaufmann* ‘merchant’, *Fachmann* ‘expert’, and *Geschäftsmann* ‘businessman’, have been successfully feminized by replacing the masculine *-mann* ‘man’ with *-frau* ‘woman’. Moreover, and in contrast with English, these new feminized terms “are now firmly established in the language of the 21st century” (Leue 2000, 165), with words such as *Kauffrau* ‘merchant (f)’, *Fachfrau* ‘expert (f)’, and *Geschäftsfrau* ‘businesswoman (f)’ occurring regularly (Leue 2000, 165). Here we see a successful example of feminine integration in language, of equality in pairings, and a movement away from masculine privilege.

FEMININE DERIVATION

Both English and German follow the practice of deriving a female form from a male counterpart; both languages reveal an imbalance in the resultant pair. Although the words are semantically equal, the connotative differences between them are great. Bonvillain (2008, 212) cites the “negative attributes” that have become attached to the female component of the following English pairs: governor/governess, king/queen, master/mistress, sir/dame, bachelor/spinster. Always, the balance tilts to favour the male. The feminine form is trivialized in comparison, sometimes acquiring a secondary demeaning and/or sexualized significance, while the masculine form retains its original prestige (Bonvillain 2008, 212). Thus *governess* is a trivialized, lesser version of *governor*, *mistress* relates in a highly sexualized con-

text not applicable to *master*, *spinster* designates an undesirable, unmarried woman, in contrast to the available, eligible *bachelor* (Bonvillain 2008, 212).

The practice of forming female versions with suffixes results in similarly asymmetric pairings. In “A corpus-based view of gender in New Zealand English,” linguist Janet Holmes (2001, 117) writes that female suffixes in English are “widely perceived as trivializing women’s occupations and undermining their professional status.” *Sculptress*, *poetess*, and *usherette* are therefore seen as ineffably lesser than their male counterparts. Although usage of these forms is on the decline (*actor*, for example, is increasingly applied to both sexes), Suzanne Romaine (2001, 158) believes that the *-ess* suffix still surfaces for the “purpose of belittling a woman’s achievement,” as in the negative book review she received from a male reviewer wherein she was referred to as an *author-ess*. Where female derivatives are still employed, they invariably denote smallness or imitation, as in *booklet* ‘a small book’, *kitchenette* ‘a small kitchen’, and *leatherette* ‘imitation leather’ (Hellinger 2001, 109).

German, in contrast, has a well-established and well-accepted system for feminizing words. Many nouns which refer to a specific individual have both masculine and feminine forms, such as *Lehrer* ‘male teacher’ and *Lehrerin* ‘female teacher’. The *-in* suffix can also be applied in instances where the lexical gender of the word, and not necessarily the gender of the referent, is masculine. For example, *der Wähler* ‘the voter’ has a grammatically masculine gender. However, when referring to women, the *-in* suffix may be added, creating *die Wählerin* ‘the female voter’. While this strategy increases female visibility and is certainly more inclusive, it also marks the word as uniquely feminine. *Die Wählerin* is then singularly feminine, and *der Wähler* is still used in both generic and male contexts. The female element is marked as “other,” thereby perpetuating the male as norm ideology.

While German has an effective technique for feminizing language, it is strictly a one-way process. Again supporting the idea of the male as standard, masculine forms are rarely derived from

feminine. The case of *Krankenschwester* ‘nurse (f)’ is an example of this phenomenon. Historically an exclusively female occupation, there was no need for a male counterpart. However, with increasing numbers of men entering the profession, a new term was required to designate male nurses. Rather than creating a male version of the existing female form, possibly by replacing the *schwester* ‘sister’ of the original term with the masculine equivalent *bruder* ‘brother’, a new word was created: *Krankenpfleger* ‘nurse (m)’. A male nurse is now designated *der Krankenpfleger* ‘nurse (m)’, and, again reverting to the male as norm ideal, a female derivation can be used to refer to women: *die Krankenpflegerin* ‘nurse (f)’.

DEVIATION FROM MASCULINE NORMS

Derogative German terms for homosexual men extend the principle of male as norm; social standards of masculinity exert influence over linguistic form. The pejorative terms for those who deviate from traditional masculine ideals are feminine gendered. *Tunte* ‘homosexual man’, *Schwuchtel* ‘homosexual man’, and *Transe* ‘transsexual man’, reference men, but are grammatically feminine. This is not a reflection of actual or perceived gender, nor of personal qualities or characteristics, as the proper term for a homosexual man is masculine gendered (*Schwuler* ‘homosexual man’). English marks deviation from the masculine ideal in a similar manner: *queen*, as applied to homosexual men, connotes “female” and “undesirable.” The derogatively used feminine gender of these epithets demonstrates the preference for masculinity within linguistics and culture. The terminology marks as deviant the man who does not adhere to socially ascribed standards of masculinity. Simultaneously, in gendering these insults in the feminine, the terms mark female gender as less desirable.

LEXICAL AND CONNOTATIVE GENDER NORMS

The issue of whether grammatical gender influences perception of its referential gender is a contentious one. Scholars have long asserted that the system of gender is completely abstract. In “Gender: a less than arbitrary grammatical

category,” Zubin and Köpcke (1981, 439) quote Bloomfield who writes, “gender categories...do not agree with anything in the practical world ...there seems to be no practical criterion by which the gender of a noun in German, French, or Latin could be determined.” However, several studies exist which refute this theory; the German *-mut* is one such example. In German, the gender of a word is generally determined by its “last element”—a grammatical designation akin to, and hereafter referred to as, a suffix (Corbett 1991, 50). For example, nouns ending in *-keit*, *-heit*, and *-schaft*, such as *Höflichkeit* ‘politeness’, *Gereiztheit* ‘irritation’, and *Wissenschaft* ‘science’, are all feminine gendered; nouns ending in *-chen*, and *-lein*, such as *Mädchen* ‘girl’, and *Büchlein* ‘little book’, are generally neuter. The suffix *-mut*, which expresses abstract qualities and moods, is masculine gendered; accordingly, prior to the nineteenth century, new words ending with *-mut* were masculine gendered (Corbett 1991, 94). By analyzing dictionary entries and through participant study, Zubin and Köpcke (1984, 47) track a shift in language that occurred as words more “introverted” and “passive” transformed from masculine to feminine gender. *Wehmut* ‘sadness’, *Grossmut* ‘generosity’, *Anmut* ‘graciousness’ became feminine gendered, while “extroverted” and “aggressive” words such as *Lebensmut* ‘exhilaration’ and *Übermut* ‘bravado’ remained masculine (Zubin and Köpcke 1984, 47). These findings suggest that grammatical gender is neither unimportant nor irrelevant but rather that social constructions and lexical gender are closely linked. Zubin and Köpcke’s work makes explicit the relationship between gender and ascribed gender-related characteristics.

STRATEGIES FOR CORRECTION

There is a growing awareness of gender bias in both languages. So far, English language attempts to correct this imbalance have focused largely on neutralization. Emphasis has been placed on avoiding false generics (instances of generic *he* and *-man*), removing gender-marked terms for female referents (such as *actress* and *stewardess*), and eliminating marked words for

which no parallel male form is employed (such as *female doctor*) (Hellinger 2001, 109). German attempts at correction, however, have focused largely on feminization, on increasing female visibility in the language. This has led to the use of *Paarformen* ‘pair forms’, such as *die Nürnberger Stadtväter und -mütter* ‘the Nuremberg city fathers and mothers’ and *jeder Wähler oder jede Wählerin* ‘each [male or female] voter’ (Bußmann and Hellinger 2003, 155). Also common is the use of *Sparformen* ‘economy forms’, which combine male and female referents, as in *LeserInnen* ‘readers (m/f)’ (a combination of *Leser* ‘reader [m]’ and *Leserinnen* ‘readers [f]’) (Bußmann and Hellinger 2003, 155). The fact that these amendments have been adopted by a variety of public and private institutions suggests that perhaps they will (or even have?) become the new norm (Leue 2000, 176). “Ultimately,” Leue writes, “only those forms will last which are accepted by the general public and are used in their everyday language” (Leue 2000, 176).

CONCLUSION

I began this paper expecting to find that a genderless language like English would contain fewer masculine biases. I expected to find more masculine references in German, a language where gender is marked, indicated, and referenced. Instead, I found that both languages contain a number of covert and overt masculine allusions, that both have a fundamentally patriarchal structure, and that both privilege—at the expense of the female—a male perspective. By “avoiding the dominant visibility of masculine terms,” genderless languages may be thought of as more egalitarian and gender-neutral (Hellinger and Bußmann 2001, 20). However, as Hellinger and Bußmann (2001, 20) write, “in genderless languages it may be even more difficult to challenge the covert male bias and the exclusion of female imagery.” If anything, the grammatical gender of German has forced an acknowledgement of the male as norm ideology and has furthered subsequent efforts at correction which have yet to really develop in English. German speakers have been and are confronting the disparity in their language in a way many English

speakers do not. And, for all the advances made towards equality of the sexes, so long as these male as norm ideologies linger in our language, they will linger in our society.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was originally written for ANTHR 207: Introduction to Cultural Anthropology, and a version of it was subsequently presented at the 2011 Richard Frucht Memorial Lecture Series & Student Conference.

REFERENCES CITED

- BONVILLAIN, NANCY. 2008. *Language, culture, and communication: The meaning of messages*, 5th edition. Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- BRAUN, FRIEDERIKE, SABINE SZESNY, AND DAGMAR STAHLBERG. 2005. “Cognitive effects of masculine generics in German: An overview of empirical findings.” *Communications* 30 (1): 1-21.
- BUßMANN, HADUMOD, AND MARLIS HELLINGER. 2003. “Engendering female visibility in German.” In *Gender across languages*, volume 3, edited by Marlis Hellinger and Hadumod Bußmann, pp. 141-174. Philadelphia: John Benjamins BV.
- CORBETT, GREVILLE G. 1991. *Gender*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- HELLINGER, MARLIS. 2001. “English—Gender in a global language.” In *Gender across languages*, volume 1, edited by Marlis Hellinger and Hadumod Bußmann, pp. 105-113. Philadelphia: John Benjamins BV.
- HELLINGER, MARLIS, AND HADUMOD BUßMANN. 2001. “Gender across languages: The linguistic representation of women and men.” In *Gender across languages*, volume 1, edited by Marlis Hellinger and Hadumod Bußmann, pp. 1-25. Philadelphia: John Benjamins BV.
- HOLMES, JANET. 2001. “A corpus-based view of gender in New Zealand English.” In *Gender across languages*, volume 1, edited by Marlis Hellinger and Hadumod Bußmann, pp. 114-136. Philadelphia: John Benjamins BV.
- LEUE, ELISABETH. 2000. “Gender and language in Germany.” *Debatte* 8 (2): 163-176.
- ROMAINE, SUZANNE. 2001. “A corpus-based view of gender in British and American English.” In *Gender across languages*, volume 1, edited by Marlis Hellinger and Hadumod Bußmann, pp. 153-175. Philadelphia: John Benjamins BV.
- ZUBIN, DAVID A., AND KLAUS-MICHAEL KÖPCKE. 1981. “Gender: A less than arbitrary grammatical category.” In *Papers from the seventeenth regional meeting Chicago linguistic society*, edited by R. A. Hendrick, C. A. Masek and M. F. Miller, pp. 439-449. Chicago: Chicago Linguistic Society.
- . 1984. “Affect classification in the German gender system.” *Lingua* 63: 41-96.