

# Effects of English generic singular *they* on the gender processing of L1 German speakers

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In both German and English, generic masculine pronouns, such as *seinem* ‘his’ in (1) and *his* in (2), are often used to include people of all genders.

- (1) *An seinem ersten Schultag ist ein Schüler für gewöhnlich sehr nervös.*
- (2) *On his first day at school, a pupil is usually very nervous.*

However, previous studies found that generic masculine forms, both pronouns and role nouns, have a clear male bias (e.g., Martyna 1978; Rothmund & Scheele 2004; Braun et al. 2005; Gabriel et al. 2008; Gygax et al. 2008, 2009; Miller & James 2009; McConnell-Ginet 2013; Schmitz et al. 2023). English, as opposed to German, features an increasingly commonly used, supposedly gender-neutral alternative to generic masculine pronouns: singular *they* (Conrod 2020). This is exemplified with the possessive pronoun *their* in (3).

- (3) *On their first day at school, a pupil is usually very nervous.*

But how do German learners of English interpret English singular *they*? Gender biases in the L1 are often observed to be transferred to L2 (Cook 2018; Koster & Loerts 2020; Schoenmakers et al. 2022), but there is no straightforward one-to-one mapping of singular *they* onto a German neutral alternative. Are German speakers aware of the supposed gender-neutrality of singular *they* in English?

In order to test the gender processing of singular *they* by L1 German speakers, we conducted an online experiment. In the experiment, German participants were asked to write a short story about a student and provide the student’s name (cf. Moulton et al. 1978). Each participant received one of two versions of the writing task, one group starting the story following a sentence with a generically used *his* (2) and the other following a sentence with a generically used *their* (3). The short story approach is a tried and tested, highly controlled, and thoroughly disguised approach for eliciting gender bias in language.

We analyze the data statistically, using binomial logistic regression and controlling for important covariates. We expect the stimulus version with the generic masculine pronoun *his* to lead to significantly more male students as protagonists and to allow for less variation of protagonist genders than generic *their*. The results will have implications for English language learning of L1 German speakers, and more generally for gender bias in language.

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