

What if *-*in* is a new, gender-fair or gender-neutral suffix?

Opportunities and possible limits of gender-fair language in German

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The structure of so-called gender-fair or gender-sensitive nouns like *Freund*innen*, *Redakteur_in* or *AutorInnen* is often analysed as follows (cf. e.g. Pusch 2014; Zifonun 2021):

(1) [*Freund*] [*] [*-in*]

In (1), *Freund* is analysed as a derivational base or as a masculine noun and *-in* is analysed as the feminine suffix that we also find in derivatives like *Freundin* or *Redakteurin*, whereas the morphological status of the * is up for debate. In this talk, a different analysis is suggested:

(2) [*Freund*] [*-*in*]

I will discuss several arguments for this analysis and think through the consequences for the linguistic system. Data shows that if words like *Freund*innen* and *Freund_innen* are pronounced with a glottal stop (*Freund[?]innen*), speakers pronounce the suffix as a phonological word (Völkening 2022). As the feminine suffix *-in* does not form a phonological word on its own, but is integrated into the phonological word of the stem (cf. Wiese 1996: 67), its phonological structure differs fundamentally from the phonological structure of the new suffix *-*in*. Therefore, *-*in* and [*ʔm*] respectively could be a new suffix that is added to the mental grammar of speakers who use gender-fair language. Crucially, the *, the _ etc. is not placed *between* the suffix and the stem, but it is analysed as part of the new suffix. And therefore, not the * alone, but the suffix as a whole carries meaning.

In the talk, I will furthermore discuss the consequences of this analysis for the linguistic system. On the word-level, the new suffix *-*in* does not violate any regularities of the grammar, neither on the phonological nor on the morphological level. Only its semantics still seems to be up for negotiation by the speakers: They could use and perceive it as a gender-fair suffix (then, its derivatives evoke concepts of people of different genders) or it could be a gender-neutral suffix (then, its derivatives evoke rather neutral concepts of genderless people) – which are two very different things. Hence, I argue that psychological studies on this subject need to differentiate between these two options. On the syntactic level, the derivatives containing the new gender-fair or gender-neutral suffix are sometimes used as feminine nouns (e.g. *eine Freund*in*). If they are not (e.g. *ein*e Freund*in*), they may reach the limits of the grammatical gender system of the German language. But even so, speakers seem to have found a way to integrate these nouns into noun phrases, working with language material that is already a part of their gender system.

References

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