Comprehensibility of gender-fair language among learners of German: an experimental study

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In professional contexts, the use of gender-fair language in German is on the rise (e.g., Schneider 2022). At the same time, critics argue that gender-fair language complicates the comprehensibility of texts, especially when typographical innovations such as the gender star are used (Rat für deutsche Rechtschreibung 2023), and particularly for learners of German (Krome 2022). Since there has been little research on this topic, we tested the comprehensibility of the gender star among learners of German through an experiment with a within-subjects design. Specifically, we investigated whether the use of the star form in journalistic articles complicates text comprehensibility for learners of German compared to the use of the generically intended masculine form as measured in subjective comprehensibility and sentence difficulty ratings, performance on content questions, and full-text reading times.

80 students from Flemish higher education who study German as a foreign language participated in our study. They were asked to read 13 short news articles in German previously used in an eyetracking-study on L1-speakers (Zacharski et al. 2024). Ten texts served as experimental items each containing four tokens of one stereotypically neutral plural personal noun in either gender star or masculine-only form. The experimental texts were counterbalanced across participants, such that each participant saw five texts in star form and five texts in masculine form. Three texts not containing any inflectable role nouns served as filler texts. After reading each text, participants were asked to answer a content question, rate several statements that gauge subjective text comprehensibility and sentence difficulty (Friedrich 2017), and justify their ratings. Additionally, their proficiency in German was assessed using the LexTALE test (Lemhöfer & Broersma 2012), and demographic information was gathered, along with data on participants' prior knowledge of and attitudes towards gender-fair German (Zacharski 2024).

Our results suggest that the gender star does not pose a strong hindrance to text comprehensibility for learners of German, as it did not negatively impact text comprehensibility as measured by content question accuracy, subjective text comprehensibility, and full-text reading times. Students' justifications for their comprehensibility ratings support these quantitative results, with only 2 out of 80 students mentioning the gender star as a factor impeding their reading flow. Furthermore, whether students were more or less proficient in German or had more or less positive attitudes towards gender-fair language did not affect their comprehension of texts with the gender star versus the masculine-only forms. Interestingly, however, the gender star did have a negative effect on sentence difficulty – even though, in contrast to Friedrich et al. (2021) (experiment 2), our sentences did not include complex singular forms requiring the adaptation of noun-dependent forms such as articles. Future studies should thus investigate whether increased sentence difficulty ratings are simply caused by increased sentence length.

Overall, based on our findings, we would recommend teachers to pay attention to and integrate the gender star in the German as a foreign language classroom, even at early stages of language acquisition.

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