

How Non-Referential Masculine Forms Shape Gender Representation in German

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This study investigates the role of linguistic and extralinguistic factors in shaping gender representations induced by masculine person-denoting nouns (such as *Schriftsteller* ‘writer’, *Hundehalter* ‘dog owner’, *Bayer* ‘Bavarian’) and indefinite pronouns (e.g. *jeder* ‘everyone’, *jemand* ‘someone’). Unlike many previous studies (cf. Stahlberg & Sczesny 2001; Heise 2003; Hermeler 2021), this study exclusively examines non-referential, generically used masculine forms. Since German grammar reinforces the binary distinction between feminine and masculine categories, this study does not account for non-binary representations (see Zacharski & Ferstl 2023; Ferstl & Nübling 2024 for further discussion). The research is conducted within the framework of a DFG-funded interdisciplinary project on gendered person references (project number 456835372).

Previous psycholinguistic research has repeatedly shown that masculine generics, though intended as gender-inclusive, are predominantly interpreted as male (e.g. Irmen & Köhncke 1996; Irmen & Roßberg 2004; De Backer & De Cuyper 2012). Key influencing factors include referentiality (the more referential a term, the stronger the male bias, cf. Doleschal 2002: 39; Diewald 2018: 286; Kotthoff & Nübling 2024: 105) and number (singular forms are more likely to evoke male representations). Additionally, the lexical or contextual degree of gender-marking plays a role; for example, stereotypically male *Fußballspieler* ‘football player’ presumably induces stronger male associations than stereotypically female *Kindergärtner* ‘kindergarten teacher’ (cf. Misersky et al. 2014). Other relevant factors include the distinction between occupational (e.g. *Psychiater* ‘psychiatrist’, *Friseur* ‘hairdresser’) and non-occupational roles (*Jogger*, *Weinkenner* ‘wine connoisseur’), as well as participants’ gender. The complex interplay of these factors has not yet been systematically examined for German.

Using experimental methods such as online surveys with sentence completion and rating tasks, the study shows that while generic masculine nouns possess gender-inclusive potential, their interpretation is highly context-dependent. Women are more likely to be considered when the context involves stereotypically female activities and when plural forms and non-occupational roles are used. In contrast, indefinite pronouns such as *jeder* are more likely to be interpreted as gender-inclusive. However, once embedded in gendered contexts, indefinite pronouns shift towards a male reading (*Schweinshaxe essen* ‘eating pork knuckle’, *Fußball spielen* ‘playing soccer’) or female reading (*Prosecco trinken* ‘drinking prosecco’, *Yoga machen* ‘doing yoga’). An own-gender bias is evident, with men tending to interpret generic masculines as exclusively male.

This study provides new insights into the social function of grammatical structures, offering both a theoretical and empirical contribution to a more nuanced discussion on so-called generic masculines. Practical implications of the findings will be discussed, along with methodological challenges and limitations, such as the difficulty of accounting for individual background knowledge or personal writing and speaking styles in experimental designs.

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