

# Language/Gender/Multilingualism

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## What is gender?

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), gender is a category that “refers to socially constructed characteristics of women and men — such as norms, roles and relations of and between groups of women and men”<sup>1</sup>.

## What is sex?

According to the WHO, sex is a category that “...refers to a set of biological attributes in humans and animals. Sex is mainly associated with physical and physiological features including chromosomes, gene expression, hormone level and function, and reproductive and sexual anatomy”<sup>2</sup>.

## Correspondence between sex and gender

In some societies, there is no officially recognized canonical correspondence between sex and gender. For example, *Navajo* Native American culture counts two further genders in addition to masculine and feminine: the feminine man (*nádleehí*) and the masculine woman (*dilbaa*). Those who identify with these genders are called the ‘two-spirit people’. A third gender (or ‘other’ gender) is officially recognized in some societies, for example, the *hijras* of India, Bangladesh and Pakistan; *kathoey* in Thailand; and *muxe* in Zapotec cultures of Oaxaca (southern Mexico), who are considered neither male nor female.

## What is the situation in Germany?

In Germany, there are currently three officially recognized gender options: *m* (*männlich* ‘male’), *w* (*weiblich* ‘female’), and *d* (*divers* ‘diverse’). There is also an option for *keine Angabe* “no answer” on legal documents.

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<sup>1</sup> “What is gender?” World Health Organization. Retrieved 20 December 2021. <https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/gender-and-health>.

<sup>2</sup> “What is the difference between gender and sex?”. World Health Organization. Retrieved 20 December 2021. <https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/gender-and-health>

## What is grammatical gender?

In Linguistics, grammatical gender means a system of nominal classification based on grammatical agreement patterns. For example, in German, the noun *Frau* ‘woman’ triggers feminine gender agreement with the article *ein-e* and the adjective *gut-e*, as in (1a). And the noun *Mann* ‘man’ triggers masculine gender agreement with the adjective *gut-er*, as exemplified in (1b).

- (1) a. ein-e      gut-e      Frau                      b. ein              gut-er      Mann  
         article-FEM good-FEM woman                      article.MASC good-MASC man  
         ‘a good woman’    ‘a good man’

## Grammatical gender in German

German has three grammatical gender categories in the singular: feminine (e.g. *die Frau* “the woman”, *die Lehrerin* “the female teacher”), masculine (e.g. *der Mann* “the man”, *der Lehrer* “the teacher”) and neuter (e.g. *das Kind* “the child”, *das Mitglied* “the member”).

## Generic masculine in German

In the plural, German nouns referring to humans have traditionally been formed using grammatical forms which coincide with the singular masculine forms (e.g. *der Lehrer* “the teacher (singular)” – *die Lehrer* “the teachers (plural)”). Such forms have been termed by some scholars as the “generic masculine”.

## Gender-fair language

In modern times, the generic masculine is at the centre of an increasingly heated debate that concerns gender-equitable language. It raises the question of how German can be made more gender-inclusive and gender-fair, which means making women and diverse individuals more visible. How to address everybody rather than primarily men? And how to use language that does not disadvantage individuals of other genders?

## Recent studies

The most recent experimental studies in Linguistics (e.g. Klein 2022, Steriopolo & Schütze forthcoming) have shown that when it comes to German nouns denoting social roles and professions (e.g. *die Lehrkraft* “the teacher”, *die Rettungskraft* “the emergency worker”, *die Kontaktperson* “the contact person”), the feminine grammatical form (notice the feminine article

“die”) is the best gender-fair option because it refers to people of any gender (men, women, diverse), rather than just men. In contrast, the generic masculine form (e.g. *der Lehrer* “teacher”) has inherent male bias.

### **Take-away message**

Thus, if you need to choose between the feminine grammatical form (e.g. *die Lehrkraft* “the teacher”, *die Kontaktperson* “contact person”, *die Bürohilfe* “office employee”) and the generic masculine form (e.g. *der Lehrer* “the teacher”, *der Kontakt* “contact”, *der Büroangestellter* “office employee”), please, choose the feminine form as the most gender-inclusive and gender-fair option in German. Such gender-inclusive forms usually end in *-kraft*, *-hilfe* and *-person*.

### **Grammatical gender in multilingual context**

“Multilingualism” means the ability of a speaker to communicate efficiently in multiple languages. This means that grammatical gender forms in individual languages can affect the use of such forms in other languages, employed by multilingual speakers. For example, in Turkish, there are no gendered pronouns. The question *O nerede* ‘Where is she/he/they?’ can refer to a male, female or diverse person. In English, there is a gender-neutral pronoun, ‘they’, used to refer to a diverse person or a person whose gender is unknown. In Tai, there are formal and informal pronouns, employed in different – formal and informal – contexts. And in Mandarin, there is no difference in pronunciation of pronouns. For example, the *Hanzi* 他 for masculine and 她 for feminine are written differently, but they have the same pronunciation, and thus, in spoken language, the gender remains ambiguous.

One way for languages to affect each other in a multilingual context is language mixing. This means that grammatical forms from one language are used in another language. For example, in German, there is no exact equivalent to the English gender-neutral pronoun ‘they’. For this reason, a multilingual speaker used the English pronoun in a German sentence, as shown in (2).

(2) *German: language mixing with English*

Wo	ist	<b>they?</b>
Where	are	they (the intended meaning: gender-neutral pronoun)

## References

- Klein, Andreas. 2022. "Wohin mit Epikoina? – Überlegungen zur Grammatik und Pragmatik geschlechtsindefiniten Personenbezeichnungen". In: *Genus – Sexus – Gender*, Gabriele Diewald & Damaris Nübling (eds), 135–189. Berlin, Boston: de Gruyter.
- Steriopolo, Olga and Christin Schütze. Forthcoming. "Referential means in German: An experimental study comparing feminine epicene nouns with masculine generic nouns." *Linguistics: An Interdisciplinary Journal of the Language Sciences*.