

Gender-sensitive language in the academic teaching of German as a foreign language (DaF) – potentials, attitudes, controversies

Hanka BŁASZKOWSKA

Adam Mickiewicz University (AMU), Poznań, Poland

E-mail: blaszkow@amu.edu.pl, 

Marcel KNORN

DAAD Lectureship at Adam Mickiewicz University (AMU), Poznań, Poland

E-mail: marcel.knorn@amu.edu.pl

Abstract: The gender-sensitive language (GSL) is the subject of lively debate in the German-speaking countries, both academically and publicly, and a manifestation of the ongoing changes in the German language. It seems impossible to ignore this phenomenon in the teaching of German as a foreign language (DaF), especially at the academic level. This article will discuss GSL in university classes at AMU in Poznań, Poland, offering first a theoretical introduction and a review of research in feminist linguistics, gender linguistics and especially in the DaF area. Consecutively, the program and conclusions of an optional GSL workshop for students, conducted as part of a DAAD lectureship in 2024, will be discussed. This contributes to the linguistic and academic debate on teaching GSL in the field of foreign language didactics, highlighting the specific linguistic and cultural conditions influencing the teaching of DaF outside Germany. The article concludes that GSL should be included at least as an optional component in the academic study of German as a foreign language. To this end, a preliminary concept is proposed for discussion and further development.

Keywords: gender-sensitive language (GSL), gendering, feminist linguistics, gender linguistics, gender-sensitive didactics, academic teaching of German as foreign language (DaF), workshop of gender-sensitive language (GSL).

Introduction

Gender-sensitive language (GSL) is a term covering the use of non-sexist and inclusive language. The European Parliament (2018: 3) promotes gender neutrality in language and uses the term gender-neutral language as “a generic term covering the use of non-sexist language, inclusive language or gender-fair language”. The purpose of this use is “to avoid word choices which may be interpreted as biased, discriminatory or demeaning by implying that one sex or social gender is the norm”. Using inclusive language “also helps reduce gender stereotyping, promotes social change and contributes to achieving gender equality”. According to Szpyra-Kozłowska and Chmura-Rutkowska (2022: 11) the meaning of the term is explained through its synonyms. GSL is otherwise equal, inclusive, gender non-discriminatory, non-sexist, gender-neutral language. It is defined as the opposite of unequal, exclusionary, gender-discriminatory, sexist, male-centric, androcentric language.

GSL (*geschlechtergerechte Sprache*) is the central term of the German gender linguistics (*Genderlinguistik*). As a result of the wave of feminist linguistic criticism that swelled in German linguistics in the late 1970s, feminist linguistics (*Feministische Linguistik*) was

constituted in the 1980s. The assumptions of this trend and the actions of its representatives, aimed at eliminating linguistic sexism and shaping a “woman-sensitive language” that preserves gender symmetry, making women visible (*frauengerechte Sprache*), had a major impact on the use of the German language in the following decades. Influenced by the implemented recommendations for the use of non-discriminatory language, the German language aligned itself with the principles of equal treatment of men and women. These measures have paved the way for further linguistic changes taking place today, no longer based on the classic binary division of genders, but occurring according to new premises. The debate around the issue of gender in language has been revived especially under the influence of the Bundestag's 2018 amendment of the law on the registry of civil statuses, under which – “in keeping with the spirit of the times” – it is now possible for intersex individuals (or their parents at the child's birth) to enter a third gender as *divers* (other, different) in the gender designation column. The legal situation has thus changed significantly, also changing the perception of the prototypical categorisation of gender. Questions have arisen about linguistic forms for identifying intersex people, and new non-binary solutions have been further intensified in the use of GSL. In linguistics, meanwhile, a paradigm turn occurred, outlining the shift from feminist linguistics to gender linguistics in the 1990s.

It can be observed that German universities are actively engaged in the negotiation of GSL and its usage. This also applies to the area of German as a foreign (*Deutsch als Fremdsprache*, DaF) and second language (*Deutsch als Zweitsprache*, DaZ)¹. In this field, too, studies have already been carried out and teaching materials were published. Meanwhile, in German-language departments outside the German-speaking area, this trend is observed with some caution, as long as no consensus has emerged in the native societies.

This article attempts to outline important aspects of the ongoing debate in academic and social discourse in Germany² on the gender category in language. Under its influence, changes are being made in the use of the German language, which is also being translated into academic teaching of DaF in Germany and abroad. The potential attitudes of users and controversies surrounding this topic will be presented and discussed, as illustrated by the example of teaching German language classes at the Applied Linguistics Department at Adam Mickiewicz University (AMU) in Poznań, Poland. Furthermore, a preliminary concept will be presented to illustrate how GSL could be addressed in an extracurricular workshop for students to expand their language skills and facilitate their engagement with the debate.

1. GSL in the concepts of German feminist linguistics and gender linguistics

The feminist linguists (Trömel-Plötz 1984; Pusch, 1984; Hellinger 1980) pointed out the mechanisms of discrimination against women in the German language system and usage, declaring the language sexist and demanding a change in linguistic habits. They criticised the communicative behaviour of men and women, the language system in terms of gender-

¹ To avoid confusion with the term *gender-sensitive language* (GSL), this article employs the German abbreviations DaF/DaZ in place of the English abbreviations GFL/GSL.

² It should be noted that this debate affects the whole German-speaking area. For reasons of conciseness, however, this article focuses on the situation in Germany.

asymmetry and the use of language in relation to men and women.³ The study of linguistic usus focused on observing and analysing sexist manifestations in various communicative practices. Language policy measures were taken, including recommendations on the use of non-discriminatory language (Guentherodt et al., 1980) to help eliminate discrimination against women in the fields of law, regulations, or job advertisements. Two strategies were recommended – firstly, feminisation, i.e. the increased use of female personal designations to promote the visibility of women, and secondly, gender neutralisation, i.e. the avoidance of gender references. The changes to the German language initiated by the feminist language politics, although met with criticism, have come full circle, finding expression in legislation or the linguistic practice of, *i.a.*, the federal administration.

Since the 1990s, new aspects have been emerging in the study of language-gender relations (Günthner et al., 2012a; Nübling/ Kotthoff, 2018; Diewald/ Nübling, 2022). The focus of research is also shifting from the linguistic representation of gender in the system and use of language to the construction of gender identity in various areas of communication, situations, and textual genres. It becomes important to assume that gender is a variable of many closely interrelated aspects, such as ethnicity, social environment, age, social roles, sexual orientation, education, or non/disability (Günthner et al., 2012b: 9–10). The research applies methods of multivariate analysis and process approaches, including the concepts of interactional linguistics, such as *doing gender*, *undoing gender*, *indexing gender* (Nübling/ Kotthoff, 2018), and critical discourse analysis, as *performing gender* (Lazar, 2005). The essence of gender linguistics, like feminist linguistics, is a sociolinguistically oriented critique of language, which, however, modifies and develops both the theoretical basis and methodology. This stream is rapidly establishing its position in linguistics especially on the ground of conversation analysis and critical discourse analysis but also in discourse semantics and the study of language change, political correctness, language-institution relations, thus permeating various areas of linguistics. Gender linguistics, like feminist linguistics, combines systemic aspects in the study of phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicology with the study of written and spoken language use, but in a broader scope and based on a new methodology, as corpus-based research or psycholinguistic experiments. The fundamental difference between the two streams stems from the fact that the traditional binary concept of gender, which was still dominant in the 1980s, is no longer the sole and unquestioned point of reference today. The legal sanctioning of the third gender in Germany and the choice of the designation *divers* resulted in questions about terms for genders that deviate from the prototypical ones. Social groups starting from different conceptions of gender propose different forms of linguistic representation, but still the vast majority of those committed to gender equality in language share the prototypical conception of sexuality striving to ensure equitable representation of men and women in it. In the use of language, both strategies of feminisation and gender neutralisation remain relevant, but with the legal accommodation of the “third option”,

³ Analysis of conversations between people of both sexes uncovered conversational mechanisms of violence, used more often by men against women than vice versa, regardless of status. Studies of the language system looked at morphology (moiety and the generic masculine gender) and lexis (personal names, especially occupational designations). In particular, the use of masculine-personal forms to refer to women and mixed groups was stigmatised as a mechanism responsible for women's invisibility in language.

the gender neutralisation strategy that allows reference to all gender identities by abstracting from linguistic gender distinctions is recommended in the first instance.

Feminist linguistics has been calling for the abandonment of the generic masculine and the establishment of woman-sensitive language for 40 years, and this has contributed to a change in language in many contexts. In Germany, for example, the use or disuse of GSL is established in the academic context, has been enshrined in law at federal and state level and is taken up by the mass media. Nevertheless, it shall be stressed that there is still no uniform standard for the use of GSL. For this reason, almost every German university has already published recommendations for the use of GSL⁴ forms in official university documents, such as statutes or study and examination regulations etc. Many university guidelines recommend the use of gender-neutralising approaches (i.e. neographic writings) only when they cannot be replaced by other functional forms of gendering, such as, i.e., participles⁵. In addition, GSL is also present in many university classes, including majors and DaF/DaZ courses, where it is an important part of gender-sensitive didactics.

2. Research on GSL in the field of DaF/DaZ⁶

The topic of GSL is not explicitly anchored in DaF curricula, but it is essential for understanding language in everyday life as well as for conveying values and demonstrating the effects of language. German researchers point out that although GSL is present in the public and academic debate, there is still a lot of catching up to do in the DaF/DaZ area. According to Peuschel (2018: 357), even though the subject of DaF/DaZ is inherent in the variability of linguistic competence, research still lacks approaches that go beyond binary and heteronormative constructions of gender. The category of gender, although illuminated in language teaching from different perspectives (Lutjeharms/ Schmidt, 2006; Eichhoff-Cyrus, 2009; Gutenberg, 2014; Peuschel, 2018; Kegyes, 2022; Hirschberg, 2024), is still treated as a fixed rather than dynamic category, which does not fully reflect its complexity (Peuschel/ Schmidt, 2022: 54). The ability to participate in the German-language discourse, however, is dependent on knowledge of the order of gender, which the researchers believe should be reflected in the training of DaF/DaZ lecturers.

Several studies of gender-sensitive didactics deal with the representation of gender in DaF/DaZ school textbooks, both in synchronic (Maijala, 2009; Peuschel/ Dirim, 2019; Stummer, 2024) and diachronic (Freudenberg-Findeisen, 2004; Elsen, 2018) terms. They have analysed selected aspects of the (un)equal treatment of men and women, such as the number of references of both genders, professional representation, division of roles

⁴ A collection of guidelines, *Leitfadensammlung* V.3 of D. Elmiger, currently contains over 3000 records, including all university guidelines in German-speaking countries. (URL <https://airtable.com/shrLfUavJqISnRPEf>). [28.10.2024]. See also Siegenthaler (2023).

⁵ Resolution of the Senate of the University of Greifswald dated 17.04.2019: „The Senate of the University of Greifswald (17.04.2019) resolved to implement gender-neutral language in statutes, framework examination regulations, basic regulations and official documents. Gender-neutral forms are to be given preference and if this is not possible, the gender star* should replace gendered and non-gendered personal designations”. (Translated by H.B.)

⁶ DaF and DaZ are a common field in German studies of gender-sensitive didactics. As this article addresses the thematisation of GSL in academic language teaching in non-German-speaking countries, the focus here will remain on DaF.

in private life, the extent of GSL use. In principle, the textbooks should encourage critical reflection and show the changing social reality. Meanwhile, the results of the analyses clearly indicate that women are less represented in them (Peuschel/ Dirim, 2019: 160–162). The textbooks, moreover, do not reflect the prevailing gender diversity, they do not challenge but reinforce gender stereotypes, although diachronically there has been a slight improvement in this regard (Freudenberg-Findeisen, 2004: 262; Elsen, 2018: 185). Much better fared in these studies of textbooks is the evaluation in terms of GSL use. Other studies provide practical guidance on integrating the category of gender into language teaching (Peuschel, 2017). Gender can be both a subject of teaching in general and a subject of literary interpretation or an issue of GSL. Using GSL in lessons, the equality tenets of school education, the current linguistic changes and their impact on students' worldview are implemented. In addition, GSL illustrates typical changes and variants in language development, which also should be the subject of teaching. Foreign language thus becomes a subject of reflection on gender and gender-related activities. These activities from the point of view of greater distance from foreignness are easier and freer than in the native language. By implementing gender issues, general goals of language teaching such as the development of competence and the formation of a sensitive attitude toward others are fulfilled. Also, for a mature point of view in the discourse, an enlightened and reflected discussion is necessary. The goal should not be to convey a certain world view to the learners, but rather to enable them to position themselves and express themselves in a reflective manner. On the part of the teachers, it is also important to avoid unreflective attributions and addressing.

Further studies in the form of surveys were carried out in adult education and in non-university and university settings (Stark, 2021). The aim of the first survey, which was carried out worldwide, was to take stock of the status of GSL among DaF/DaZ teachers and their assessment of the topic. The focus here was on determining how DaF/DaZ teachers feel about GSL and its teaching, to which extent it is already part of their lessons and whether there is a connection between the teachers' assessment or private use of GSL and its inclusion in lessons. The survey revealed that the evaluation of GSLs and the assessment of their teaching in DaF/DaZ lessons are highly polarised. Despite a predominantly neutral assessment, the generic masculine continues to play a central role in the debate. For example, GSL is usually rejected on the grounds of the neutrality of the generic masculine, especially by teachers who use the generic forms. The gender star (*) can be named as the antagonist here. Teachers who use this variant are predominantly open-minded towards GSL. Overall, there is a rather open-minded assessment of GSL. This is mainly due to the desire to avoid discrimination and the pursuit of gender equality. Despite the legal recognition of a third gender in Germany in 2018 and thus the elimination of a binary gender norm, the teachers surveyed are particularly keen to achieve equality between women and men with GSL.

A survey of DaF/DaZ students was conducted in Germany, analysing the emotions evoked by various forms of gendering in the footnotes of scientific papers (Peuschel/Schmidt, 2022). The respondents most often expressed scepticism or indifference toward the various variants of personal names being evaluated, felt neither strong positive nor negative emotions, however, they found the topic difficult, in which the researchers saw an opportunity to initiate learning processes. These processes should be preceded by studies of gender relations and the ways in which GSL is used in curricula, considering the

possibility of integrating approaches based on gender equality in different areas of DaF/DaZ studies (ibid.: 67). According to researchers, furthermore, stronger links should be pursued with linguistic practice, considering the use of GSL outside of academic discourse.

Another survey was conducted among lecturers and students of DaF in Poland (Błaszowska, 2024). The survey was designed to find out whether GSL is a subject of DaF classes and what the attitudes of those teaching and studying it are in the face of current changes in the German language. Only half of the eligible DaF lecturers as well as students participated in the survey, which may indicate little interest in the topic. This attitude may also be influenced by the fact that the discussion of GSL in Polish is less advanced and changes are taking place much more slowly. The survey results showed that the subject of GSL neither arouses much interest, nor does it reveal extreme attitudes in both groups of respondents. The reason for this status quo stems from the inadequate coverage of GSL issues in DaF classes – both by teachers and in teaching materials. Both groups of respondents agreed on the benefits of using GSL, as they shape anti-discrimination attitudes and promote equality, but both groups spoke against introducing the topic into the academic DaF course curriculum due to the lack of standardisation in German. The lecturers were less inclined to introduce GSL topics in class expressing concern that it would hinder foreign language learning. This concern was not shared by the learners, who expressed interest in optional classes raising the topic, as they considered it essential to know the tendencies.

3. Conceptual example of an academic workshop on gender-sensitive German

As previously stated, students and academic teachers of DaF may hold divergent attitudes towards bringing up the issue of GSL in class. Initial findings suggest that students might perceive the topic as more essential to gaining linguistic competences than their educators (Błaszowska, 2024). Nevertheless, it can be observed that those learning German, particularly at higher levels, encounter the topic of GSL anyhow – for example through authentic texts, informants, or social media. As the discourse surrounding GSL in the German-speaking countries has become more contended in recent years it might be time to consider whether omitting the topic of GSL in curricula is still appropriate and didactically sensible.

While, *de facto*, some DaF textbooks address the phenomenon, they often lack the conceptual context⁷ due to didactical or editorial reasons. Some resources openly recommend that learners pay attention to GSL. While these statements are didactically reasoned, a non-contextualised recommendation for these forms might take too little account of the discursive connotations. For example, the use of the particularly contentious neographic spellings may encounter disapproval from linguistically more conservative recipients

⁷ A case in point is the textbook “Deutsch üben: Briefe, E-Mails und Co.” (Brill et al., 2021) by the publisher Hueber, which was designed to familiarise learners with the conventions of business correspondence. The textbook acknowledges the existence of different approaches to addressing people regarding their gender and states that traditions are currently undergoing changes. It concludes with the assertion that attention should be paid to gender inclusiveness. Other textbooks, such as for example “Vielfalt” (Giersberg et al., 2023), also published by Hueber, employ various ways of gender references (generic, dual, neographic) in reading texts.

while conversely, their absence might be perceived negatively in certain gender-sensitive contexts. A lack of contextualisation could lead to students, and thus future intercultural professionals, not knowing what is expected of them as language users. Consequently, it could be argued that the academic teaching of DaF should consider treating GSL as a form of linguistic variation.

In response to requests made by students, a concept for a voluntary workshop on GSL was developed at the AMU in Poznań. The extra-curricular unit was conducted as part of the activity within the local DAAD Lectureship. The general concept of this workshop, which is presented below, should not be regarded as a definitive template. Rather, it should serve as a suggestion for discussion on how this topic, which is of great importance in terms of language policy and sociolinguistics, can also be incorporated into the academic teaching of DaF.

The proposed workshop concept on German GSL consists of a single session lasting four academic hours (i.e. 180 minutes plus break) and aimed at engaging students in a discussion about personal designation in German as well as the various advantages and disadvantages of different approaches. As of May 2024, the workshop has been held twice, with 18 participants of different genders and at various stages of their studies in Applied Linguistics or Germanic Philology at AMU. For an intensive discussion, the small group size is important. All participants had a German language level of CERF B2 or higher, which could be recommended to be able to engage thoroughly with the content. Furthermore, a similar workshop was made available to academic DaF teachers.

The course concept consists of two parts: The first phase is devoted to clarifying the subject matter and presenting various methods of personal reference in German. Based, i.a., on Diewald and Steinhauer (2017), the following nine forms⁸ are discussed, which can be divided into four groups according to gender markedness:

1. Generic forms in which one grammatical gender stands for all social genders:
 - *Lehrer* (generic masculine);
 - *Lehrerinnen* (generic feminine).
2. Double forms using both grammatical genders:
 - *Lehrerinnen und Lehrer*;
 - *Lehrer und Lehrerinnen*;
 - *LehrerInnen* (short form using a word-internally capitalised female suffix).
3. Inherently gender-neutral forms:
 - semantically neutral grammatical replacements such as adjectives or participles, e.g. *Lehrende*;
 - semantically neutral replacements, e. g. *Lehrkräfte*, *didaktisches Personal*;
 - avoidance of using a noun altogether: *Wer unterrichtet*, ...

⁸ In GSL practice, not every designation can be expressed through each method in a way preserving the same semantic or stylistic level – e.g., in the case of the designation “Gärtner” (gardener), the present participle of the corresponding verb (“Gärtnernde”, meaning “someone gardening”) is not currently in widespread use.

4. Gender-neutralising strategies:

- neographic forms, in which a special character is inserted in-between the male root form and the female suffix, e.g., *Lehrer:innen*, *Lehrer*innen*.⁹

Using sample text fragments, students were asked to consider each of these forms from different perspectives. The objective of the first phase was to ensure that all learners had a comprehensive grasp of the subject matter and could develop a nuanced understanding of the topic from a linguistic perspective. Thus, they were prompted to identify examples of ways to reflect gender markedness at the morphological, syntactic and lexical level. The students analysed the different strategies, formulated their own preferences, and discussed that each form may have some advantages and disadvantages, such as readability, language conventions, accessibility for the visually impaired, text length, visual aesthetics and others. The fragment used as a sample text for this task was derived from the former German chancellor Angela Merkel's New Year's address from 2018/2019¹⁰. This text, in its original form, already contains a variety of the above-mentioned strategies. During the exercise, the students were asked to reflect on the text's personal designations which were then subjected to multiple editorial changes (e.g., using only generic masculine, double or neographic forms etc.). The participants have come to recognise that gender sensitivity can be seen as a value at play when editing texts, which needs to be weighed against other factors on a case-by-case basis, depending on the function and audience of a given text.

The second phase of the workshop was dedicated to offering insights into the current political and social discourse around GSL taking place in the German-language area. The objective of this phase was to familiarise learners with the diverse arguments and attitudes pertaining to the matter in the current public discourse. Students should be enabled to understand GSL not as a closed and fully regulated unity, but as a discursively negotiated topic which is still in progress. Furthermore, they should gain an understanding of the social, linguistic, political and ethical implications of GSL. For this purpose, the second section presented students with common arguments for and against the use of forms of gendering. The participants engaged in a structured debate, considering the social, linguistic, and cultural implications of these arguments. The students were encouraged to uncover the underlying rationale behind each argument, while also developing their ability to assess the persuasiveness of the arguments presented. In the subsequent phase, the students were presented with quotations from prominent figures of the German-speaking world, which they were asked to contextualise with the results of their earlier discussions. The different viewpoints were gathered from various publicly available media sources. To elicit a diverse range of perspectives, the students were presented with contrasting standpoints of which two shall be presented here as an example. The first

⁹ Given its innovative nature, this form has become particularly associated with the reflection of non-binary gender identities. However, preferences towards the inserted special character can differ. In speaking, some speakers use a glottal stop in this position. Importantly, these neographic forms spark the most controversy among language users because they deviate from the generally accepted conventions not only in terms of linguistic usage but also in terms of standard grammar, lexicon, pronunciation, and orthography.

¹⁰ Source: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/newsletter-und-abos/bulletin/neujahrsansprache-2019-von-bundestkanzlerin-dr-angela-merkel-1566380>
[Accessed 28.05.2024]

quotation is drawn from an interview with Ferda Ataman, the Independent Anti-Discrimination Commissioner of the German Federal Government. When asked about her opinion on the ban on certain GSL forms of spelling in correspondence by some Federal state authorities, Ataman replied:

I'm one of those people who don't always use the correct gender forms 100 per cent perfectly. I think you don't have to strain yourself. You should feel comfortable with language. The whole thing is not a compulsory exercise and not a competition. In the 21st century, prohibiting state institutions from addressing more genders than two is clearly a step backwards. What exactly is being banned here, tolerance and respect?¹¹

Ataman's rather supportive but cautious stance towards GSL can be contrasted with the clearly negative attitude of Alice Weidel, Co-chairwoman of the German far-right populist political party AfD. In a press statement, Weidel is quoted as follows:

The so-called 'gender-sensitive' language is an Orwellian project. It not only rapes our mother tongue and smashes texts to the point of incomprehensibility, but it also wants to influence and control our thinking in line with gender ideology by manipulating language.¹²

The two quotations already demonstrate two exceedingly divergent perspectives¹³ and make clear why the fundamental issue of categorising the topic of GSL discursively is of great importance for language learners and native users alike. While language planning institutions are monitoring developments, the lack of consensus on the use or non-use of certain forms is a significant issue that has yet to be resolved. The German Orthography Council, for example, states it is observing current trends but doesn't see a final solution that would allow it to make an official recommendation (Rat für Rechtschreibung 2018). The current use of gender-sensitive forms and the discourse surrounding them are developing rapidly, and it is unlikely that this debate will be resolved soon. In the context of academic teaching, however, this could be regarded as an argument in favour of addressing GSL rather than against it. Only by engaging in the debate can students gain an understanding of the complexity of the issue and the current state of the German-speaking discourse on the matter.

At the end of the second phase, students were provided supplementary resources and online content. The workshop concluded with an opportunity for students to share their opinions on the matter anonymously. They were asked about their prior knowledge, their perception of acquired competences, and their views on the integration of GSL into curricula. The feedback was positive. Many noted that the workshop helped them to better understand the complexity of GSL, its applications and surrounding controversies. This can be exemplified by the case of one student's anonymised written feedback, which encapsulates many points made by participants:

¹¹ Translated by M.K. (URL <https://www.rnd.de/politik/ferda-ataman-ueber-genderverbote-und-gendergerechte-sprache-man-muss-sich-keinen-abbrechen-FJ5OI2WXP5CMNOW2URYUXFPP5Y.html>) [Accessed 28.05.2024].

¹² Translated by M.K. (URL <https://www.presseportal.de/pm/130241/4216071>). [Accessed 28.05.2024].

¹³ Some of the other text fragments presented in the workshop relate to the pursuit of gender-sensitive or neutralising strategies in general, while others pertain to specific sub-forms.

I think it [GSL] is a part of linguistic politeness, and we also learn about that in class (greeting formulas, salutation etc.). Ways of using gender-sensitive German could be introduced without “forcing” someone to use a certain form (i.e. it wouldn't have to be assessed by tests). Also, controversies are always interesting for philology/linguistics students, especially such “language controversies”, so they could potentially make normal classes more appealing¹⁴.

Another student provided a summary of their experiences, emphasising that an understanding of the social and political context associated with GSL is essential for being able to navigate through the discourse surrounding it. They not only mentioned the interest in controversies, but also stressed the relevance of knowing about them to professionally engage with language:

Before the workshop, I knew that there are many ways of writing gender-inclusively. However, I had no idea that this topic is so controversial. In my opinion, this matter is of great importance, especially because I am a philology student, thus it is very useful to know about cultural and social issues¹⁵.

These participants' statements show that the integration of GSL into the academic teaching of DaF could mean an opportunity to enrich the linguistic competence of students while fostering awareness of contemporary discourses. Thus, the workshop demonstrated that it is possible to engage students in meaningful discussions about GSL. Such discussions could enable students to gain insight into the potential of the subject area, develop their own attitudes towards it, and acquire the skills necessary to navigate possible controversies.

4. Conclusions and prospects

Research into gender-sensitive language (GSL) shows its profound influence on German linguistics and socio-cultural dynamics. Originating from the feminist critique of language in the late 1970s, German GSL has evolved into an important element of gender linguistics and reflects wider social changes, such as growing gender equality and the recognition of non-binary identities. Despite the at times contentious discourse around the topic, the lack of a social consensus for or against the use of gender-sensitive or even gender-neutralising scripts and speech remains a challenge, leading to different approaches and ongoing debates in the academic and public spheres.

For some time, these discussions have extended to the field of didactics of German as a foreign language (DaF). While academic institutions inside Germany play a key role in these societal changes themselves already, a general didactical response to these changes is still evolving and its outcome remains uncertain. Therefore, foreign German language departments often opt for an observational role. When analysing the possibilities of including GSL in the academic teaching of DaF at these departments, conclusions can be drawn in the form of a triad of potentials, attitudes and controversies.

¹⁴ The feedback was originally provided in German. (Translated by M.K.)

¹⁵ The feedback was originally provided in German. (Translated by M.K.)

Despite certain prevailing hesitations among teachers, the potential of addressing GSL in academic DaF lessons should not be ignored. Therefore, this article proposed a concept for an extracurricular workshop on the matter, which has been subjected to a practical trial. Its main aim is not to prescribe certain behaviours, but to improve participants' skills navigating through the debate. The unit includes an analysis of personal reference methods in German, as well as a discussion of common arguments for and against GSL. The voluntary workshop was well received by participants, who stated that they felt their competences could be strengthened by such initiatives. This suggests that thematising GSL could help prepare students to deal with variation linked to gender sensitivity. It needs to be stressed that the proposed concept is not intended as a blueprint, but as an invitation for discussion and further development.

While attitudes towards the subject may occasionally overlap on both sides of the classroom, there are instances where their understanding of the implications diverge. A survey conducted among lecturers and students of Applied Linguistics at AMU Poznań explored attitudes towards including GSL in DaF lessons amidst ongoing changes in the German language. The survey revealed moderate interest and no extreme attitudes, attributed to limited coverage of the topic in classes and materials. Despite acknowledging the advantages of GSL, both groups were hesitant to incorporating it into the academic curriculum due to a lack of standardisation. Lecturers expressed particular concern about the potential impeding impact on language learning, while students were more open to the possibility of optional classes on the topic.

Controversies surrounding GSL are prominent in Germany both in academia and the public sphere. The choice of certain new or traditional forms of spelling or speech can be associated with political positioning, and a symbol as small as an asterisk can evoke feelings of sympathy or provoke harsh metaphors. Understandably, the intensity of this debate can deter educators from addressing GSL in class. However, there are indications that including the topic could be beneficial for students, as it allows them to engage with an important current language policy debate directly. Addressing GSL in the classroom not only facilitates a deeper understanding of linguistic nuances but can also promote critical thinking and enable students to engage more deeply with cultural codes and contexts.

In conclusion, GSL represents a contentious yet fruitful and dynamic development in the field of modern German linguistics that requires constant attention and adaptation in didactical practice. Being a highly controversial topic, GSL is undergoing constant discussion in German mass media, academia, politics, economy and even pop culture. It seems unlikely that this topic will either disappear from academic discourse or can be excluded from treating authentic materials until the German-speaking societies have reached a social consensus.

Bibliography

- Błaszowska, H. (2024), *Język równościowy w nauczaniu DaF na poziomie uniwersyteckim – postawy osób uczących i studiujących wobec jego zastosowania w praktyce dydaktycznej*, (in:) „Neofilolog” 62/1, 61–77.
- Brill, L.M./ M. Techmer/ M. Görgen (2021), *Deutsch üben. E-Mails, Briefe & Co. Praktische Beispiele und Übungen*. München.

- Diewald, G./ A. Steinhauer (2017), *Richtig gendern. Wie sie angemessen und verständlich schreiben*. Berlin.
- Diewald, G./ D. Nübling (eds.) (2022), *Genus – Sexus – Gender*. Berlin/Boston.
- Elsen, H. (2018), *Gender in Lehrwerken*, (in:) „Feministische Studien“ 36/1, 178–187.
- European Parliament (2018), *Gender-neutral language in the European Parliament*. (URL https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/151780/GNL_Guidelines_EN.pdf). [9.05.2024].
- Freundenberg-Findeisen, R. (2004), *Frauen- und Männerbilder. Beobachtungen in Lehrwerken für Deutsch als Fremdsprache*, (in:) K. Eichhoff-Cyrus (ed.), *Adam, Eva und die Sprache*. Mannheim, 248–264.
- Giersberg, D./ A. Schnack/ C. Seuthe/ U. Luger/ I. Buchwald-Wargenau (2023), *Vielfalt B2.2, Kurs- und Arbeitsbuch*. München.
- Guentherodt, I./ M. Hellinger/ L.F. Pusch/ S. Trömel-Plötz (1980), *Richtlinien zur Vermeidung sexistischen Sprachgebrauchs*, (in:) „Linguistische Berichte“ 69, 15–21.
- Günthner, S./ C. Spieß/ D. Hüpper (2012a). *Genderlinguistik: Sprachliche Konstruktionen von Geschlechtsidentität*. Berlin/Boston.
- Günthner, S./ C. Spieß/ D. Hüpper (2012b), *Genderlinguistik. Perspektiven der Genderlinguistik – eine Einführung*, (in:) S. Günthner/ C. Spieß/ D. Hüpper (eds.), *Genderlinguistik: Sprachliche Konstruktionen von Geschlechtsidentität*. Berlin/Boston, 1–25.
- Gutenberg, A. (2014), *Gendering/Queering the Language Classroom. Gender und Queer Studies als Herausforderung für das schulische Fremdsprachenlernen*, (in:) E. Kleinau/ D. Schulz/ S. Völker (eds.), *Gender in Bewegung*. Bielefeld, 107–120.
- Eichhoff-Cyrus, K. (2009), *Feministische Linguistik im Unterricht, Deutsch als Fremdsprache (DaF)*, (in:) K. Lochtmann/ H.M. Müller (eds.), *Sprachlehrforschung. Festschrift für Prof. Dr. Madeline Lutjeharms (Fremdsprachen in Lehre und Forschung, 44)*. Bochum, 125–135.
- Hellinger, M. (1980), *Zum Gebrauch weiblicher Berufsbezeichnungen im Deutschen - Variabilität als Ausdruck außersprachlicher Machtstrukturen*, (in:) „Linguistische Berichte“ 69, 37–58.
- Hirschberg, T. (2024), *Geschlechtergerechte Sprache und Deutsch als Fremdsprache (DaF)*, (in:) E. Trutkowski/ A. Meinunger (eds.), *Gendern – auf Teufel*in komm raus?* Berlin, 168–177.
- Kegyes, E. (2022), *Genus, Geschlecht und Gender: Möglichkeiten und Grenzen im DaF/DaZ-Unterricht*, (in:) A. Freese/ O.N. Völkel (eds.), *Gender_Vielfalt_Sexualität(en) im Fach Deutsch als Fremd- und Zweitsprache*. München, 35–52.
- Lazar, M. (eds.) (2005), *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis. Gender, Power and Ideology in Discourse*. Houndmills et al.
- Lutjeharms, M./ C. Schmidt (2006), *Sprache und Geschlecht. Zur Relevanz der linguistischen Gender-Forschung für Deutsch als Fremdsprache*, (in:) E. Neuland (ed.), *Variation im heutigen Deutsch: Perspektiven für den Sprachunterricht*. Frankfurt a. M., 211–222.
- Majjala, M. (2009), *Typisch Frau... Typisch Mann... Zur Genderproblematik in Lehrwerken für Deutsch als Fremdsprache*, (in:) „Zielsprache Deutsch“ 36/1, 33–60.
- Nübling, D./ H. Kotthoff (2018), *Genderlinguistik. Eine Einführung in Sprache, Gespräch und Geschlecht*. Tübingen.

- Peuschel, K. (2017), *Gender: von der Kategorie zur Praxis*, (in:) „Praxis Fremdsprachenunterricht“ 3, 5–6.
- Peuschel, K. (2018), *Aspekte von Gender in der Sprach(aus)bildung Deutsch (als zweite, dritte und Folgesprache)*, (in:) I. Dirim, A. Wegner (eds.), *Normative Grundlagen und reflexive Verortungen im Feld DaF/DaZ*. Opladen, 344–362.
- Peuschel, K./ Í. Dirim (2019), *Migrationspädagogische Zugänge zum Umgang mit Sexismus in Lehrwerken für die Deutschvermittlung*, (in:) A.M.B. Heinemann, N. Khakpour (eds.), *Pädagogik sprechen*. Berlin, 153–167.
- Peuschel, K./ L. Schmidt (2022), *Gendergerechte Sprache in Deutsch als Zweit- und Fremdsprache: Einstellungen von Studierenden zu ihrem Gebrauch in Universität und Unterrichtspraxis*, (in:) A. Freese/ O.N. Völkel (eds.), *Gender_Vielfalt_Sexualität(en) im Fach Deutsch als Fremd- und Zweitsprache*. München, 53–72.
- Pusch, L.F. (1984), *Das Deutsche als Männersprache*. Frankfurt a. M.
- Rat für deutsche Rechtschreibung, *Geschlechtergerechte Schreibung: Herausforderung noch ohne Lösung*, Pressemitteilung vom 08.06.2018.
- Siegenthaler, A. (2023), *Von gendergerecht bis antidiskriminierend: Tendenzen aktueller deutschsprachiger Leitfäden für gendersensible Sprache*, (in:) „Bulletin suisse de linguistique appliquée“ (Bulletin VALS/ASLA) 116, 159–186.
- Stark, K.S. (2021), *Gendergerechte Sprache im DaZ/DaF-Unterricht: Bewertung und Vermittlung durch DaZ/DaF Lehrkräfte*. Augsburg. (URL <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-76058-2>). [12.04.2024].
- Stummer, N. (2024), *Gendersensible Sprache im Fremdsprachenunterricht Deutsch. Aktuelle Befunde aus Lehrmaterialien*, (in:) „Wiener linguistische Gazette“ 96, 1–28.
- Szpyra-Kozłowska, J./ I. Chmura-Rutkowska (2022), *O (nie)równości płci w języku. Poradnik dla nauczycielek i nauczycieli*. Warszawa.
- Trömel-Plötz, S. (1984), *Gewalt durch Sprache. Die Vergewaltigung von Frauen in Sprachen*. Frankfurt a. M.