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Current Discourses on Gender-Sensitive Language

A Contrastive Comparison of Germany and Finland

Genus und Geschlecht in europäischen Sprachen

"The debate about gender-neutral language has been going on in Germany for over 40 years. As a result of the spread of gendered forms (Wählende) and special graphic characters (Dozent*in), the tone of the debate has become much rougher; the two 'camps' are now almost irreconcilable and often talk at cross purposes.

This collection brings together contributions in eleven European languages in which aspects of language history and the current debate are treated as neutrally as possible and polemics are avoided. The aim of the volume is to provide food for thought on the complex relationship between gender and sex and in this way to contribute to a more relaxed and respectful debate.

The first article, on gendering in ancient times, provides an introduction to the topic, followed by studies in German, English, Dutch, Norwegian, Swedish, French, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Czech and Finnish."

"Gendern und Gleichstellungspolitik in Finnland"
Genus und Geschlecht in europäischen Sprachen
Gender-senstitive language and equality policy in Finland

Christian Niedling, Mia Raitaniemi



Sustainable Development Goals (UN)



- Our vision for a gender equal world - YouTube

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Activation

Gender-sensitive Language





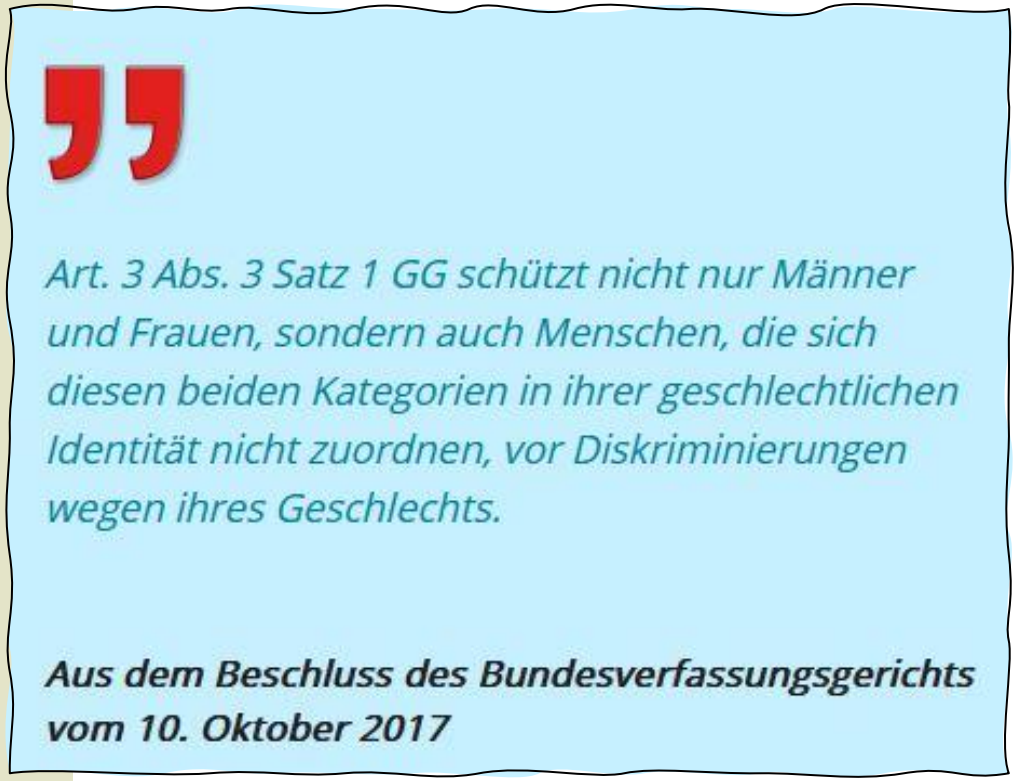
Outline

- **Introduction**
- **Part I: Linguistic Gender Equality in Finland and Germany**
- **Part II: Research**: A survey of Finnish learners of German as a foreign language in higher education

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View of the German Federal Constitutional Court

- Change in linguistic usage:
- gender-neutral formulations or use of 'both' genders
- Since 2017/18: Change in the German Civil Status Act: male/female/**diverse**
- Asterisk (*) as a symbol of the visualization of diversity
- (The asterisk is) “chosen by more and more speakers and writers, as well as by institutions such as the Goethe-Institut, model speakers in news programs or journalists” (Müller-Spitzer 2022)



Deutsch-Finnische Handelskammer
Saksalais-Suomalainen Kauppakamari
Tysk-Finska Handelskammaren

Markteinstieg Innovationstransfer Mitglied

AHK Finnland › Über uns › Offene Stellen › Mitarbeiter*in Vertrieb & Markteintritt (w/m/d)

Mitarbeiter*in Vertrieb & Markteintritt (w/m/d)

Wir suchen zum nächstmöglichen Zeitpunkt eine*n

Mitarbeiter*in Vertrieb & Markteintritt (w/m/d)

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Finnish

- "Genderless" language/ no gender markers
- No male/female/neuter for nouns
- No articles
- No distinctions between masculine and feminine forms of personal pronouns
  - Hän [youtube]
- Semantic gender:
  - nainen/woman
  - Äiti/mother
- Gender inflection
  - Opettaja – opettaja**tar (female teacher)**

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Finland, Phase 1

- "The not so skillful women" Center for Native Languages
- (Kotimaisten kielten keskus, **KOTUS**, Center for indigenous languages)
- ***nais****autoilija ('**Women**-car driver'),*
  - *better: autoilija*
- *naisurheilija*
- *naistaiteilia*

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Finland, Phase 2

Explicitly masculine job titles are replaced

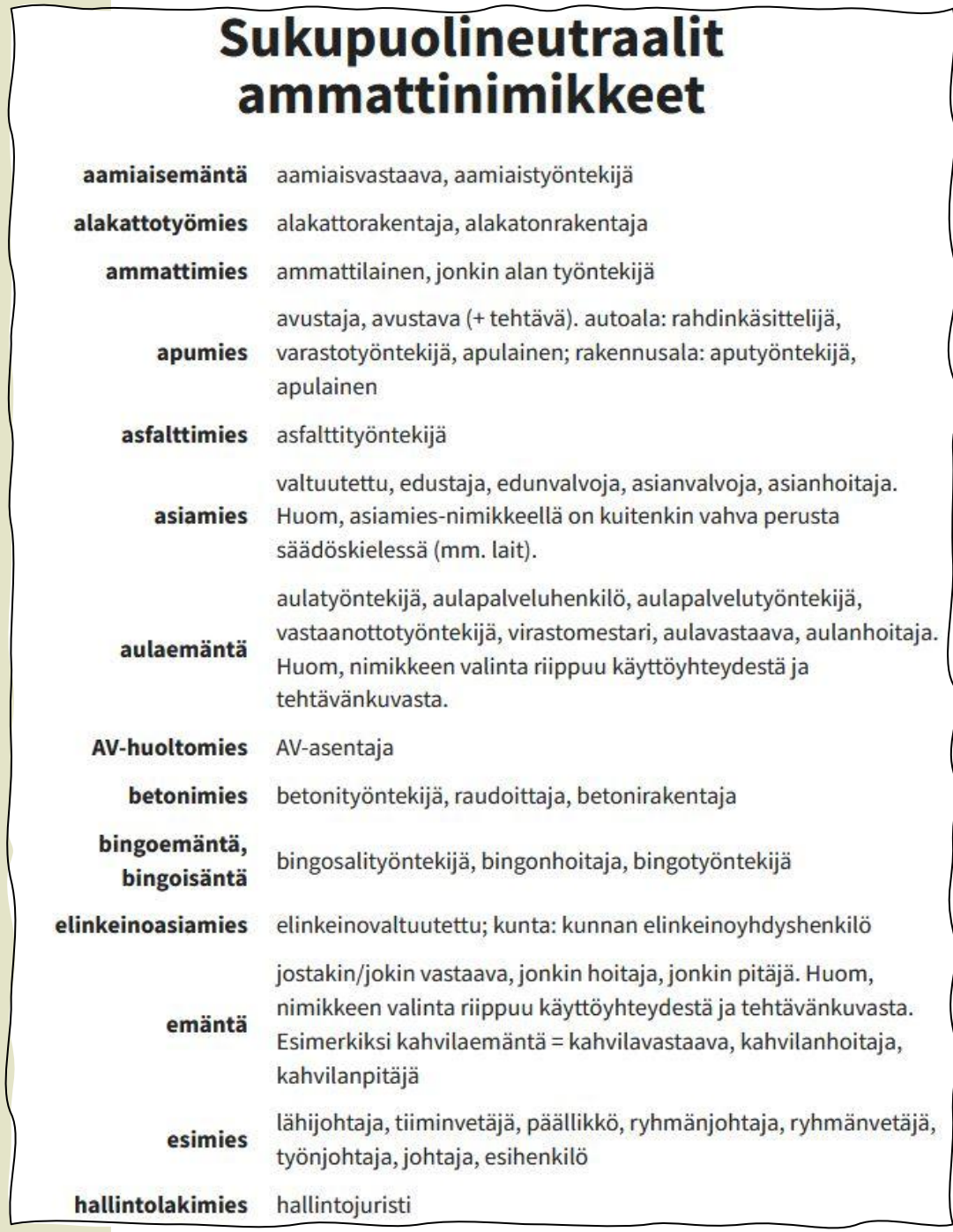
- Laki**mies** (law-**man**) 'lawyer'
- Puhemies (speak-man) 'chairman'
- Palomies (fire-man) 'firefighter'
- Mila Engel and the Gender Equality Commission (TANE) (2018)
- joka**mies** (every-man = everybody [jeder**mann**])
- **mie**histö (the crew [die **Mann**schaft])
- *sisarukset* (to *sisko* 'sister') in the meaning 'sibling'



Finland, Phase 3

Gender-equal measures

- THL, Finnish Institute for Work and Welfare: Project Sukupuolella on väliä 2014-2020: infographics, educational materials
- KOTUS together with Duunitori 2019: job titles, e.g. *esimies (fore-man) 'supervisor'*, better: *työnjohtaja, tiiminvetäjä, päällikkö esihenkilö (fore-person) etc.*
- Finnish Lawyer's association,formerly *Lakimiesliitto*, since 2022 *Juristiliitto:* public debate(s)?



Sukupuolineutraalit ammattinimikkeet

aamiaisemäntä	aamiaisvastaava, aamiaistyöntekijä
alakattotyömies	alakattorakentaja, alakatonrakentaja
ammattimies	ammattilainen, jonkin alan työntekijä
apumies	avustaja, avustava (+ tehtävä). autoala: rahdinkäsittelijä, varastotyöntekijä, apulainen; rakennusala: aputyöntekijä, apulainen
asfalttimies	asfalttityöntekijä
asiamies	valtuutettu, edustaja, edunvalvoja, asianvalvoja, asianhoitaja. Huom, asiamies-nimikkeellä on kuitenkin vahva perusta säädöskielessä (mm. lait).
aulaemäntä	aulatyöntekijä, aulapalveluhenkilö, aulapalvelutyöntekijä, vastaanottotyöntekijä, virastomestari, aulavastaava, aulanhoitaja. Huom, nimikkeen valinta riippuu käyttöyhteydestä ja tehtävänkuvasta.
AV-huoltomies	AV-asentaja
betonimies	betonityöntekijä, raudoittaja, betonirakentaja
bingoemäntä, bingoisäntä	bingosalityöntekijä, bingonhoitaja, bingotyöntekijä
elinkeinoasiamies	elinkeinovaltuutettu; kunta: kunnan elinkeinoyhdyshenkilö
emäntä	jostakin/jokin vastaava, jonkin hoitaja, jonkin pitäjä. Huom, nimikkeen valinta riippuu käyttöyhteydestä ja tehtävänkuvasta. Esimerkiksi kahvilaemäntä = kahvilavastaava, kahvilanhoitaja, kahvilanpitäjä
esimies	lähijohtaja, tiiminvetäjä, päällikkö, ryhmänjohtaja, ryhmänvetäjä, työnjohtaja, johtaja, esihenkilö
hallintolakimies	hallintojuristi

Germany: On the timeliness of the discourse



Vater prozessiert gegen Gendersprache

Der Bürger*innenkrieg

Volksinitiativen, Klagen, Morddrohungen: Der Widerstand gegen Genderstern und Binnen-I wird härter. Warum ein Vater gegen das Gendern an der Schule seines Kindes jetzt sogar vor Gericht zog – und wie die Lehrkräfte kontern.

Von **Guido Mingels**

30.03.2023, 09.04 Uhr • aus **DER SPIEGEL 14/2023**

»better visibility of sexual diversity«

»right«

»transphobic«

»securing of existing power relations«

»violation of general personal rights«

»totalitarism«

»coercion«

»denigration«

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Criticism of the generic masculine (GM)

- **Semantic**
  - GM as *genus commune*
  - Genus vs. Sexus

Der Student – die Studenten
Die Studentin – die Studentinnen

  - **Problematic alternative forms**
    - Double constructions
      »Bürgerinnen und Bürger«
      »Studentinnen und Studenten«
    - Participial constructions
      »Liebe Studierende«





GM vs. *

- **Grammatically**

  Der Arzt – des Arztes; die Ärztin – der Ärztin

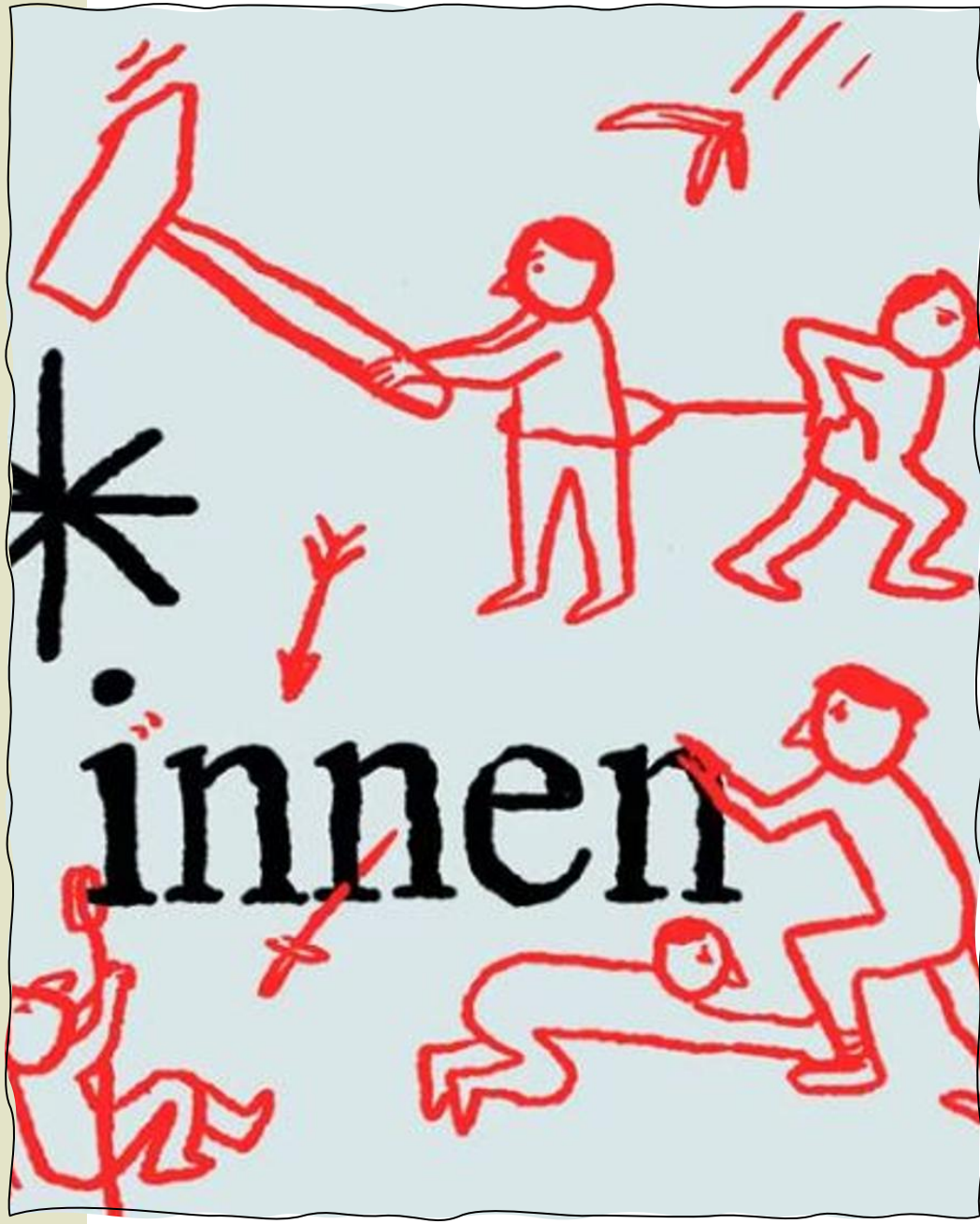
  *»des/der Ärzt*in«*
- (The asterisk is) “chosen by more and more speakers and writers, as well as by institutions such as the Goethe-Institut, model speakers in news programs or journalists” (Müller-Spitzer 2022)

- **Practical-linguistic dimension**
- Readability
  - Learnability (to enable concentrated acquisition in (higher) education)
- Comprehensibility
- Linguistic correctness

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Wer ”normiert”?

- »Sprachliche Normierungen werden von den bekannten Institutionen wie der DUDEN-Redaktion, der Darmstädter Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung, von dem Mannheimer Institut für Deutsche Sprache und vom Rat für deutsche Rechtschreibung übernommen.« (Windisch 2022, 249f.)





Recommendations: 26.03.2021

»Gender-equitable texts should

- be factually correct,
- be understandable and legible,
- be readable (in view of the ageing of the population and the tendency in the media to make texts available in readable form),
- Ensure legal certainty and clarity,
- be transferable with regard to German-speaking countries with several official and minority languages (Switzerland, Bolzano-South Tyrol, East Belgium; but also Austria and Germany for regional official and minority languages),
- ensure that readers and listeners can concentrate on the essential facts and core information.

The Council also emphasizes that gender-appropriate spelling must not make learning written German more difficult (learnability).« (German spelling council)

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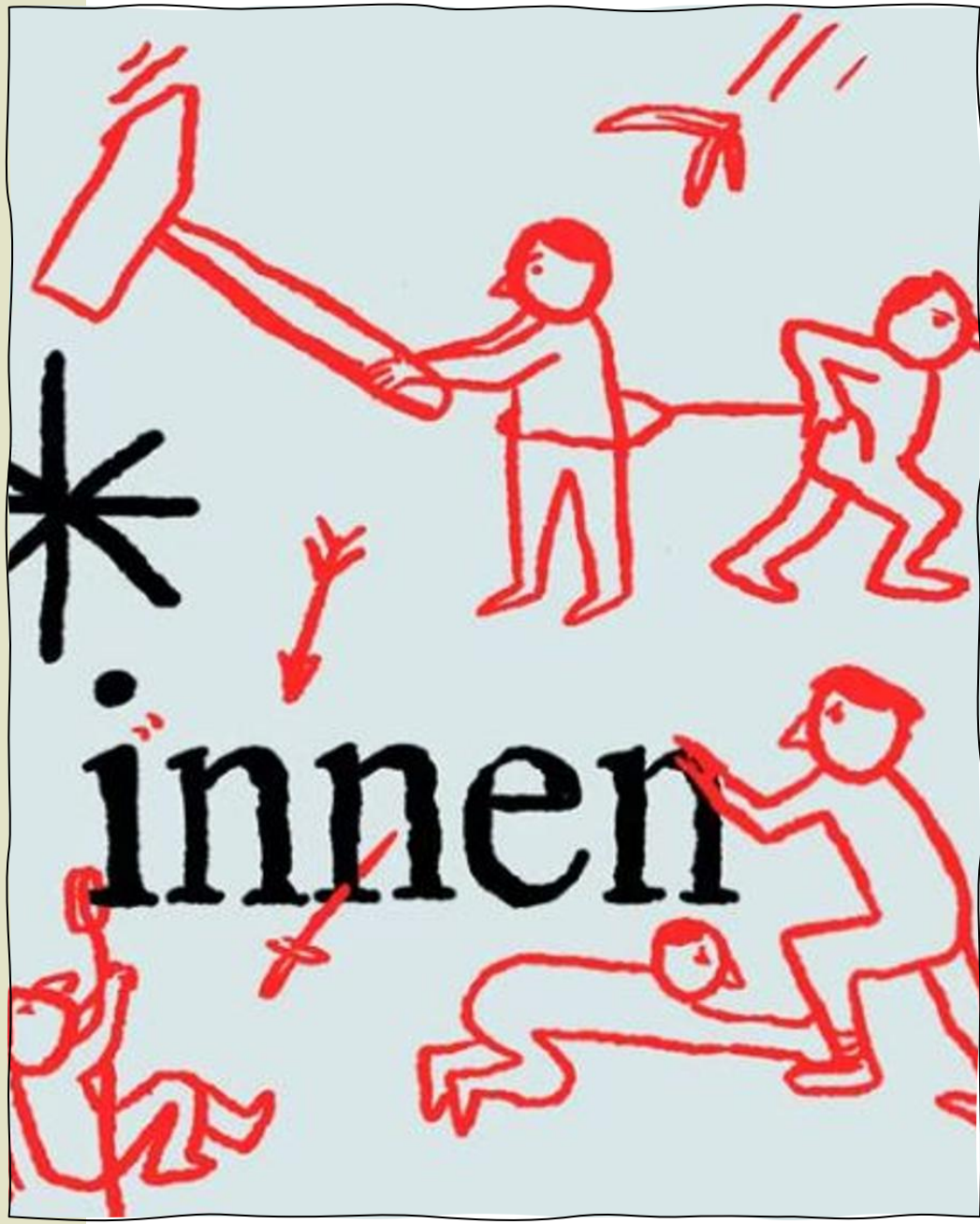
Case: Germany

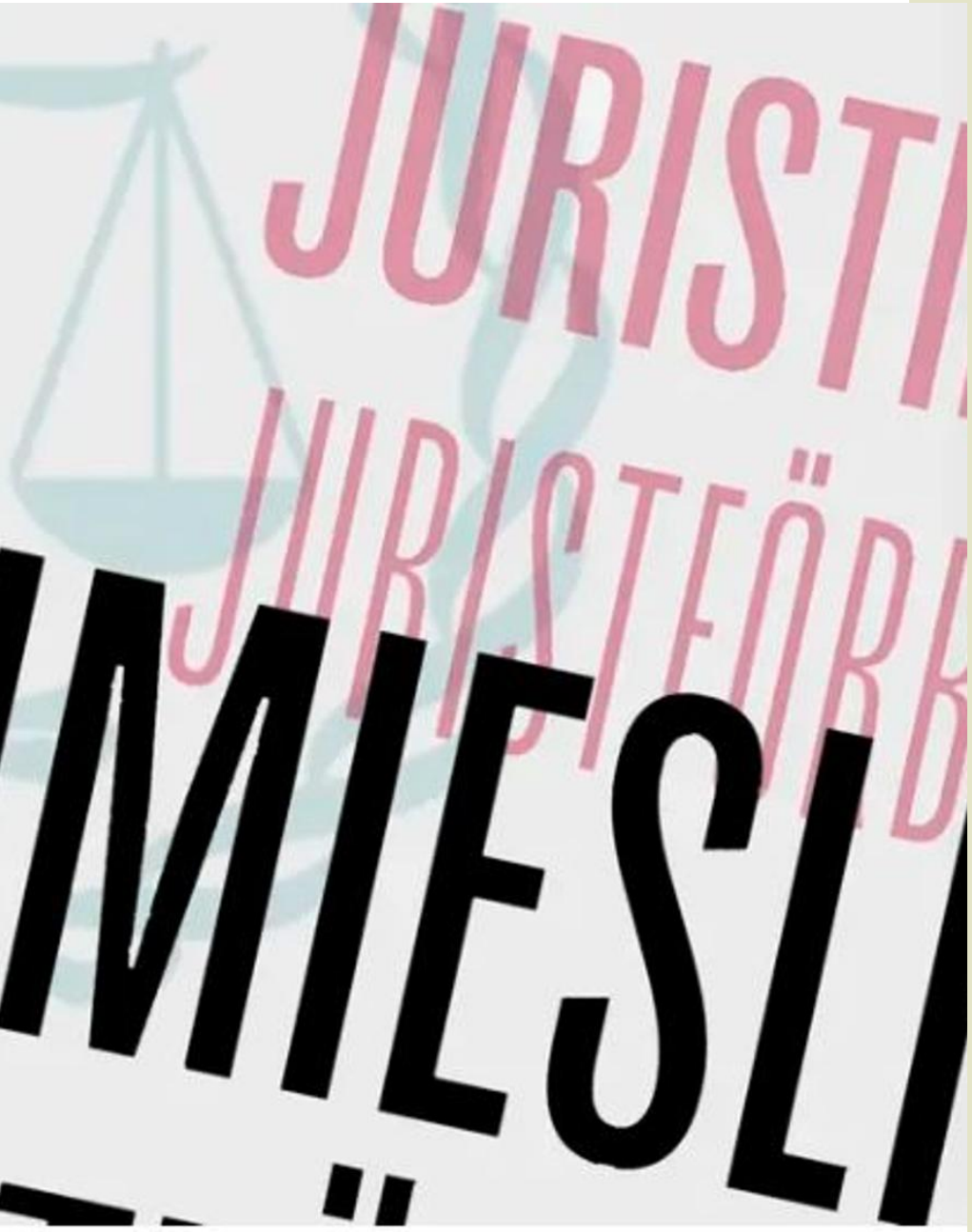
VW manager against Audi

»Der_die BSM-Expert_in ist qualifizierte_r Fachexpert_in«

Lawsuit "had attracted nationwide attention because there are also guidelines for the use of gender-sensitive language in other companies. The plaintiff had been supported by an association(1) that also rejects gendering."

(1) “Association”: *Verein Deutsche Sprache*





Case: Finland

Finnish lawyer's association

Lakimiesliitto --> Juristiliitto (2022)

- perceived as modern, as it better covers the diverse membership

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Conclusion

- Finland
  - Official recommendations can be pragmatically integrated.
  - Changes refer to neutral job titles.
  - Discourse is minimal and largely completed.



- Germany
  - Official recommendations are controversial; it is difficult to replace GM, there are no unproblematic alternatives.
  - The changes are a major intervention in language use.
  - The debate is ongoing and sometimes unobjective.



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4. Research: A survey of Finnish learners of German as a foreign language in higher education

- **“Gender-inclusive language in German”**
- Webropol survey of Finnish students of German, conducted in autumn 2024
- **N = 91**
- **Age**
  - 68 (72.7%) under 30
- **Where do participants study German?**
  - Language Centre: 20 (25%)
  - Faculty of Humanities: 60 (75%)
  - Not specified: 11 (including native speakers)

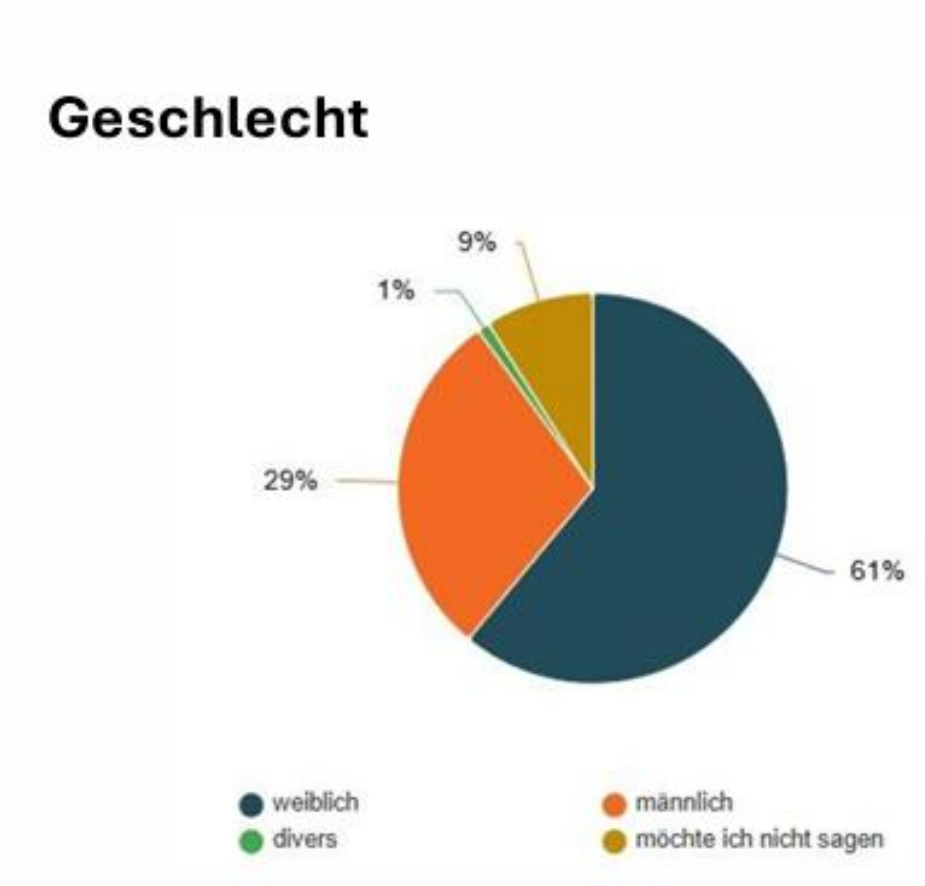
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Research questions

1. What do Finnish learners of German as a foreign language and students of German Studies know about the German debate on gender-inclusive language?
2. How important do they consider gender-sensitive language use in German?
3. How willing are they to use gender-inclusive language themselves, and which forms do they prefer?
4. What experiences emerge that should be addressed in language teaching?

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Background

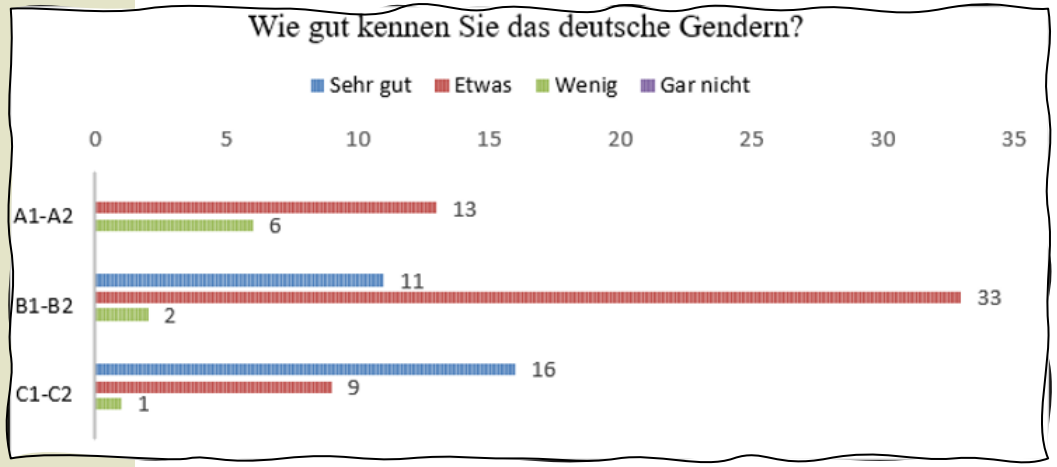




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Knowledge of gender-inclusive language in German

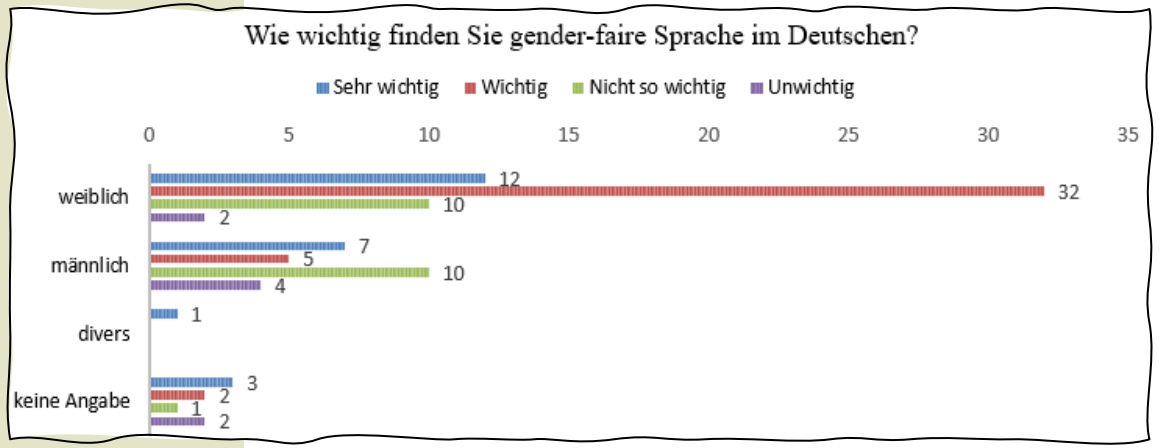
- The majority are “somewhat” familiar with it (55)
- “Very familiar”: 27 | “Slightly familiar”: 9
- No one: “Not at all familiar”
- A2–B2 → predominantly “somewhat familiar”
- C1–C2 → more frequently “very familiar”
- Trend: Higher language proficiency → greater knowledge



How important is gender-inclusive language? (N = 91)

- **Female respondents: 80% “very important” / “important”**
- **Male respondents: 46%**
- **Respondents identifying as diverse: 1 person → “very important”**
- **Respondents who did not specify their gender: 62%**

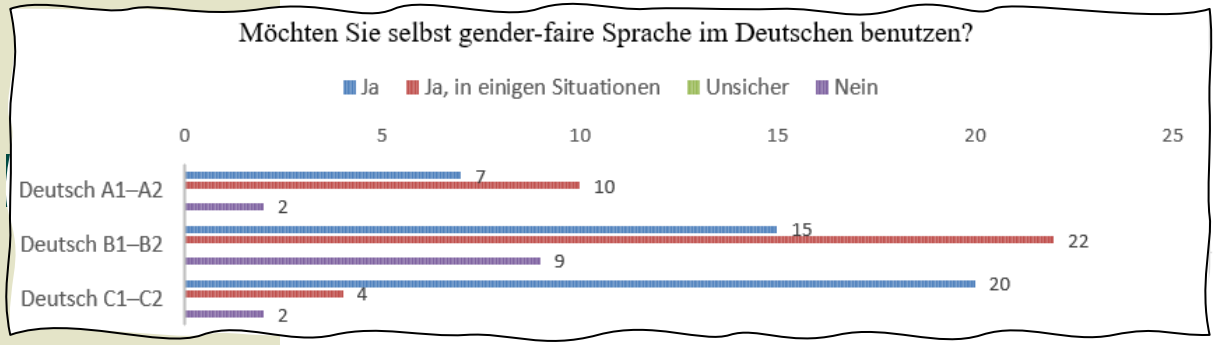
→ Clear differences by gender



Would you like to use gender-inclusive language yourself?

- Overall, a high level of willingness
- Female respondents: **95%** → yes / partly
- Male respondents: **83%** → yes / partl
- Highest proportion of unequivocal "yes" responses at C1–C2
- B1–B2: more frequent **context-dependent decisions**

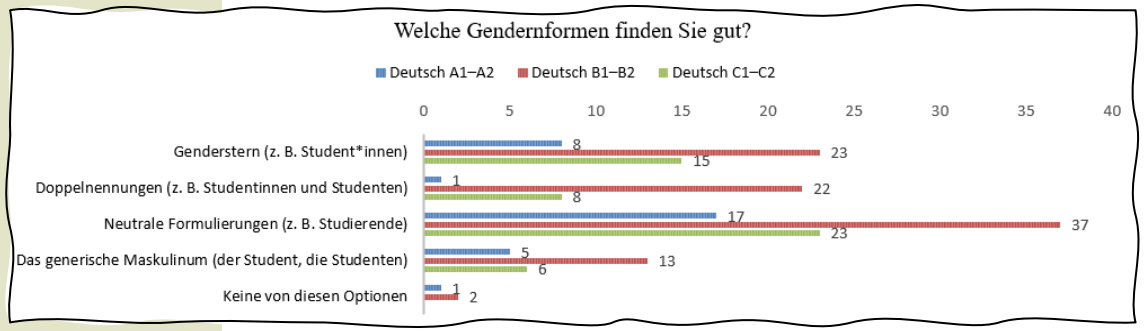
→ Trend: Higher language proficiency → more definite willingness



Which gender-inclusive forms do you favour?

- Multiple responses permitted
- **1. Gender-neutral forms** (“Studierende”)
- **2. Gender asterisk** (“Student*innen”)
- **3. Paired feminine and masculine forms** (“Studentinnen und Studenten”)
- Generic masculine: **lowest level of approval**

→ Overall, **a pragmatic and inclusive attitude**



Personal experiences

- Contradictory experiences
  - Appropriate and inappropriate situations for using gender-inclusive language
  - Gender-inclusive language may be expected or dismissed as “pretentious”
  - Public authorities vs. university professors

I have just spent ten months studying in Germany and, as a language student, experienced this issue firsthand.

The topic seems to be very sensitive and highly polarised. There were situations, especially in university settings, where I received disapproving looks if I did not use gender-inclusive language. Some young people even have stickers on their laptops saying ‘*INNEN’. At the same time, however, there were also situations among university students where I was laughed at for using gender-inclusive language. Moreover, some students who generally support gender equality consider people who use gender-inclusive language to be pretentious. During visits to rural areas, gender-inclusive language was also mocked.

In Bavaria, gender-inclusive language was banned during my stay. Nevertheless, university professors said we should continue using it—there was even an official announcement to students about this.

Many young people, even women, say that in the past, a word such as ‘Schüler’ [the masculine form of ‘pupils’] referred to everyone in the class and that nobody gave it any further thought.

Conclusions from the survey

- Gender-inclusive language is already familiar to learners at lower proficiency levels
- Higher proficiency → **greater knowledge and confidence**
- Overall, **a pragmatic attitude**
- Preferred: **gender-neutral wording**
- Challenge: **Which form suits which situation?**
- No uniform practice in German

Implications for teaching German as a foreign language

- Introduce gender-inclusive language **early**
- Take a non-prescriptive approach: no single “correct” form
- Beginners: **gender-neutral forms** as an accessible starting point
- Compare German and Finnish contrastively
- Advanced learners: incorporate **the wider societal debate**
- Aim: **Reflective and context-appropriate language use**

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