

On the rejection of gender-inclusive language in the German  
political discourse  
An analysis of press statements from right-wing and conservative parties

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Backlash? Gender-Inclusive Language in a Time of Resistance



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Investigation of the German political discourse on gender-inclusive language:  
Political discourse as part of a broader backlash.

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### Main observations

- i. The political discourse surrounding gender-inclusive language is oversimplified.
- ii. The political discourse surrounding gender-inclusive language only superficially concerns language (the underlying political agenda is different).
- iii. The political discourse surrounding gender-inclusive language is populist.

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- iii. The political discourse surrounding gender-inclusive language is populist.

→ Nothing new or surprising, but this has not yet been systematically demonstrated in the context of political discourse.

## Background: gender-inclusive language

In German, there are several ways to realize gender-inclusive language:

**Doubling:** explicitly male and female forms

- (1) *Lehrer und Lehrer-innen*  
teacher [PL] and teacher-FEM.PL  
'male and female teachers'

### Nominalized participles

- (2) *Studier-ent-e*  
study-PTCP-PL  
'students'

**Special characters:** gender star '\*', gender colon ':', gender gap '\_'

- (3) *Lehrer-\*innen*  
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The forms differ in whether they include non-binary people and whether they conform to the official spelling convention ('amtliche deutsche Rechtschreibung').

## Data sample

Press releases or texts in the 'News' section of political parties' websites.

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### **Which political parties?**

All parties represented in the German Bundestag during the 20th legislative period and which addressed gender-inclusive language in their programs for the 2025 federal election.

- i. AfD [Alternative for Germany]  
→ ranging from right-wing populist to right-wing nationalist
- ii. CDU/CSU [Christian Democratic Union/ Christian Social Union]  
→ conservative

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**Position on gender-inclusive language:** The parties identified reject the use of gender-inclusive language. Parties that are in favor of using gender-inclusive language – or at least do not explicitly reject it – do not mention the issue in their election manifestos.

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**Position on gender-inclusive language:** The parties identified reject the use of gender-inclusive language. Parties that are in favor of using gender-inclusive language – or at least do not explicitly reject it – do not mention the issue in their election manifestos.

Since gender-inclusive language is hardly discussed at the federal party level within the CDU, I have also included several state parties in order to increase the data sample:

- iii. CDU Hamburg
- iv. CDU Saxony

## Identification of relevant texts

All texts were searched electronically for keywords:

- *Gender*
- *Geschlecht* 'gender, sex'
- *Sprache* 'language'

(A similar procedure has been used by [Meuleneers, 2024](#), 154.)

When statements about gender-inclusive language are made, one of the keywords appears (in co(n)text).

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- (4) *Es wird unter anderem der Vorwurf ausgesprochen, Kinder und Jugendliche würden in den Formaten der Öffentlich-Rechtlichen durch Falschinformationen und **Transgender-Propaganda** ideologisiert und frühsexualisiert.*

'Among other things, the accusation is made that children and young people are being ideologized and sexualized at an early age by false information and **transgender propaganda** in public broadcasting formats.'

(AfD, Juni 3, 2022)

The sentence contains the noun *Transgender* 'transgender', but the text does not address the topic of gender-inclusive language.

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	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	total
AfD	4	10	10	4	1	0	29
CDU (federal)	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
CDU Hamburg	0	2	1	1	0	0	4
CDU Saxony	2	5	0	1	0	0	8
CSU	1	4	2	2	1	1	11

**Table:** Absolute numbers of relevant texts per year and party. **Total number of texts = 53.**

Gender-inclusive language is an issue that is unevenly distributed across the parties and individual years.

## Identification of sentences addresses gender-inclusive language

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Party	Absolute number of sentences
AfD	108
CDU (federal)	1
CDU Hamburg	39
CDU Saxony	101
CSU	26

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**Assertion** about gender-inclusive language: A (reconstructable) statement about gender-inclusive language that is asserted or presupposed as a fact ('true').

Assertions do not have to be realized as explicit predications, but can be converted into such:

*Genderideologie* 'gender ideology' (5) asserts: 'gender-inclusive language is ideological'.

(5) *Politisch korrekte Sprachvorgaben zur Durchsetzung der **Gender-Ideologie** lehnen wir ab.*

'We reject politically correct language requirements for enforcing **gender ideology**.'  
(AfD, August 30, 2020)

## Assertions about gender-inclusive language II

Not every sentence makes a single assertion about gender-inclusive language; some sentences contain **more than one** assertion. Thus, the number of sentences does not correspond to the number of assertions.

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Absolute number of assertions per party:

	Sentences	Assertions
AfD	108	102
CDU	1	0
CDU Hamburg	39	51
CDU Saxony	101	99
CSU	26	18

## Assertion: patterns

Recurring argumentation patterns can be inductively identified with regard to assertions:

<b>Gender-inclusive language . . .</b>	<b>Absolute numbers</b>
is compulsion	58
is ideological	48
is against spelling rules and/or grammar	46
affects language negatively	37
affects society/ culture/ people negatively	27
is based on misunderstandings of language	23
is rejected by the majority of people	17
is irrational	8
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## Language-related & non-language-related assertions: Quantitative analysis

	<b>AfD</b>	<b>CDU Hamburg</b>	<b>CDU Saxony</b>	<b>CSU</b>	<b>total</b>
language-related	31 (0.3)	26 (0.51)	43 (0.43)	6 (0.33)	106 (0.39)
non-language-related	63 (0.62)	25 (0.49)	56 (0.57)	12 (0.67)	156 (0.58)
irrationality	8 (0.08)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	8 (0.03)

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A majority of assertions are non-language-related. This fits with Christen's (2023, 45) observation that in Swiss German media discourse critical on gender-inclusive language, the focus is only superficially on language, and that the debate actually serves to address deeper political concerns.

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→ Language-critical discourse as a vehicle for – right-wing and/or conservative – identity politics.

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'The opportunism of the CDU, which can be observed nationwide, is opening the floodgates to **gender nonsense** in our schools.'  
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We also find this argumentation pattern – and the same derogatory terms – among CDU/CSU politicians (e.g., on social media), but not in the press releases.

## Language-related assertions

Gender-inclusive language ...	AfD	CDU Hamburg	CDU Saxony	CSU	total
is against spelling rules and/or grammar	5	24	13	4	46
affects language negatively	21	2	12	2	37
is based on misunderstandings of language	5	0	18	0	23

→ Due to time constraints, the analysis focuses on the **first assertion pattern**.

## Limitations: gender stars but almost no participles

- (7) *Als erster Landesverband der CDU Deutschlands hat die Hamburger CDU [...] beschlossen, dass in allen Behörden, Schulen, Universitäten und anderen staatlichen Einrichtungen die amtliche deutsche Rechtschreibung, die **Gender-Sternchen** oder **Gender-Doppelpunkte** eindeutig ausschließt, verwendet werden soll.*

'The Hamburg CDU [...] was the first regional association of the CDU in Germany to decide that all government agencies, schools, universities, and other state institutions should use the official German spelling rules, which clearly exclude **gender stars** and **gender colons**.'

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### 1. Reason

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### 1. Reason

These forms represent sex/gender beyond the binary distinction of 'male vs. female' and thus contradict conservative identity politics.

### 2. Reason

These forms violate official spelling rules, whereas other forms (e.g., nominalized participles) do not.

## Gender-inclusive language is against spelling rules/ grammar

### **Standardized spelling**

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### Simplifications:

- i. The argumentation does not show a (clear) distinction between spelling and grammar.
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### Simplifications:

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- ii. The argument does not distinguish between the different legal statuses of orthographic and grammatical norms.

The argument creates a **conflict of values**: It is more important that the language complies with the standard than that it is gender-inclusive ([Stolle, 2025](#), 318).

## Non-language-related assertions

<b>Gender-inclusive language ...</b>	<b>AfD</b>	<b>CDU Hamburg</b>	<b>CDU Saxony</b>	<b>CSU</b>	<b>total</b>
is compulsion	22	8	22	6	58
is ideological	25	4	17	2	48
affects society/ culture negatively	7	10	9	1	27
is rejected by the majority of people	8	2	6	1	17
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Ideology, compulsion and rejection by the majority of people go hand in hand: an ideological minority is forcing gender neutral language ('gender-inclusive language as an oppressive ideology' [Pfalzgraf, 2024, 197](#)).

## Who compels?

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CDU Saxony	( <i>selbsternannte</i> ) <i>Weltverbesserer</i> '(self-proclaimed) do-gooders', <i>Aktivisten</i> 'activists', <i>von oben</i> 'from above', <i>autoritäre Linke</i> 'authoritarian left'
CDU Hamburg	<i>Scheinliberale</i> 'pseudo-liberals'
CDU	<i>Grüne</i> 'Greens'
AfD	<i>Gender-Mafia</i> 'gender mafia', <i>Grüne</i> 'Greens', <i>Ökomarxisten</i> 'eco-Marxists', ( <i>selbsternannte/ urbane</i> ) <i>Elite</i> '(self-proclaimed/ urban) elite', <i>rotgrün</i> 'red-green', <i>linksgrün</i> 'left-green', <i>links</i> 'left'

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- Gender-inclusive language is associated with left-wing green politics across party lines.
- The AfD combines its negative stance with criticism of the elite (which can also be found in other policy areas). This makes it possible to link the discourse on gender-inclusive language to other anti-elite discourses.

→ In arguments that are associated with a different argumentative pattern, even the CDU relates gender-inclusive language to elites.

## Populism: elitist minority vs. the people

Gender-inclusive language is portrayed as the ideology of an elitist minority that wants to impose its language form (ideology) on the majority ('the people').

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- (9) *Schlussendlich lässt sich feststellen, dass das Gendern ein Ausdruck einer **elitären Hochschulintelligenz** ist, die den Bezug zur Wirklichkeit der Bürger außerhalb der Universitäten verloren zu haben scheint.*

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Contrast between a homogeneous people ('the people') and an elite that acts against the people. → **Populism** (Müller, 2017, 187; Finke, 2026, 19)

This argument is supported by the statement that a majority rejects gender-inclusive language (→ reference to surveys; Finke, 2026, 234)

The non-language related assertion patterns exhibit clear characteristics of populist discourse.

## Conclusion

Due to time constraints, I have only discussed the most frequent language- and non-language-related argumentation patterns.

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### **Summary**

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Gender-inclusive language is primarily an issue for right-wing or conservative parties in political discourse.

Numerous **simplifications** are made in the discourse:

- i. It is suggested that grammatical norms had the same official status as spelling norms.
- ii. It is suggested that orthographic/grammatical problems with individual forms are representative of all forms of gender-inclusive language.
- iii. A dichotomy is suggested between the homogeneous people who reject gender-inclusive language and the elites who want to force the use of this form of language.

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Particularly with regard to the issue of compulsion, the political discourse across party lines is proving to be **populist**.

In most cases, the argumentation patterns only superficially relate to language, and the focus on gender-inclusive language actually serves to advance broader identity-political goals.

# Thank you for your attention!

## Contact

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Upcoming podcast: *Sprache & Gender(n)*



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