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"*L'état, c'est they*" – Investigating the opposition to gender-inclusive language in non-binary Wikipedia biographies

The growing presence and visibility of people who self-identify as non-binary has created a demand for linguistic innovation, particularly in languages with agreement-based morphosyntactic gender. Examples include lexical neologisms (e.g. English *nibling*), neopronouns (e.g. Swedish *hen*), affixal morphology (e.g. Portuguese *-e*) and orthographic changes (e.g. the so-called gender star in German) (Papadopoulos 2025). Such innovations have sparked considerable resistance in scholarly, political and general media discourse (Pfalzgraf 2024 ed.).

Wikipedia presents itself as an ideal corpus for cross-linguistic research into this recent backlash. It constitutes a multilingual hypertext comprised of collaboratively edited articles that are accompanied by version histories and talk pages (Gredel/Storrer/Herzberg 2018). To avoid misgendering non-binary individuals, different language communities within Wikipedia have developed specific lexico-grammatical strategies that often straddle a very thin line between linguistic innovation and self-imposed standards of encyclopaedic style. In my research project, I both describe such strategies of gender-inclusivity and analyse the (usually highly controversial) debates surrounding their adaptation. In this talk, I will present data from four selected language versions (English, Spanish, German and Hebrew), focusing on two main research questions: first, how do opponents of gender-inclusive language justify their resistance, and second, how do the four language versions compare in this respect?

To answer these questions, I examine talk pages and version histories from ten non-binary biographical articles in each language. The analysis focuses on two aspects: identifying argumentation topoi and describing conceptual metaphors of language (Wengeler 2003, Lakoff/Johnson 2003 and Meuleneers 2025) that support a critical view of gender-inclusive innovations. The results reveal many patterns similar to those attested in discourse analyses of other institutional settings (Pfalzgraf 2024 ed.). However, in the case of Wikipedia, two aspects seem to play a particularly important role: encyclopedic style and neutral point of view.

References:

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Biography:

Jochen Matthies studied linguistics, turkic studies and German as a foreign language in Mainz and Halle (Saale). He recently completed his doctorate at Technische Universität Berlin, studying patterns of self-reference in second language academic writing. In his current research, he combines language typology and corpus based approaches with different areas of applied linguistics, such as discourse analysis and language for specific purposes.