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**Linguistic Purism and  
Resistance to Gender-Inclusive Language:  
Discourse Strategies of the German  
*Verein für Sprachpflege (VfS)***

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# Overview 1: Gender-inclusive German in a nutshell

- Traditionally: masculine generics ← now regarded as problematic
- Morphosyntactical solutions
  - Using pairs: *Studentinnen und Studenten* [binary]
  - Nominalised present participles: *Studierende* [non-binary]
  - general nouns; derivations; past participles; passive [it depends]
- Orthographic solutions:
  - *Schrägstrich* (splitting): *Student/innen* [binary]
  - *Klammern* (brackets): *Student(innen)* [binary]
  - *Binnenmajuskel* (capital I): *StudentInnen* [binary]
  - *Gendersternchen* (gender star) *Student\*innen* [non-binary]
  - *Genderlücke* (gender gap) *Student\_innen* [non-binary]
  - *Genderdoppelpunkt* (gender colon) *Student:innen* [non-binary]

# Overview 2: GIL Backlash in Germany

- Political parties & politicians
  - (Far-)right-wing populist *Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)*: founded 2013, strong focus 2017–present
  - Conservative mainstream Christian Democratic Union (CDU): increasingly visible 2018–present: mainstream & AfD discourse
- Federal states (*Bundesländer*)
  - Some have forbidden GIL in state admin and/or schools (Bavaria, Hesse, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, Schleswig-Holstein = CDU et al.)
- Intellectual & discursive actors
  - Divided are: both Linguists (re generics) and Feminists (re trans)
- Civil society & organised movements
  - Protests, demonstrations, petitions, etc. against '*das Gendern*'
  - Language protection organisations, e.g. VDS, VfS, BfdS, VMW

# Introduction: Verein für Sprachpflege, (VfS)

- Founded in 1963 by German teacher Heinrich Heeger (1917–1985) as a countermovement to GfdS (Gesellschaft für deutsche Sprache)
- Strong emphasis on fighting foreign words and promoting ‘pure’ German vocabulary; published *Der Sprachpfleger* 1963–1985
- VfS strongly declined after Heeger’s death in 1985; it lost structure, and it temporarily ceased functioning
- Revived in the wake of the German Neo-purist movement in 1999/2000, as an association of representatives from various language associations, with the aim of enabling jointly-developed publications
- Current Chair (since 2005): Thomas Paulwitz; since 2000 also the editor of the VfS’s publication *Deutsche Sprachwelt (DSW)*
- *DSW*: Free quarterly publication, 12 pages (print & online editions)  
The most recent, available issue of *DSW* is no. 100 (autumn 2025)

# Background to our study

- Mid-2010s: debate on how to make the German language more gender-inclusive gained momentum and reached the mass media
- 2017: *Verein deutsche Sprache (VDS)* launches a dedicated issue of its *Sprachnachrichten* (75/2017/3) titled “ElefantInnen im Porzellanladen” = the beginning on the VDS’s focus on GIL
- *Verein für Sprachpflege (VfS)*: As the German National Library holds the printed editions of the VfS’s *Deutsche Sprachwelt (DSW)* only from number 83/2021/1, it is not exactly clear when the VfS started its anti-GIL activities; but one can assume it was also around 2017
- I possess the digitised *DSW* numbers 20–50, 54, and 83–100 which does not help either
- Therefore, with regard to GIL, all that can be analysed are the most recent 18 editions (83–100) of *DSW*, comprising a total of 216 pages

# Methodological considerations

- Discourse analysis.
- Not CDA but a German (more ‘philological’) variant, based on the so-called Heidelberg-Mannheim-Group; whose main proponents are Dietrich Busse, Wolfgang Teubert, and Fritz Hermanns
- Imaginary Corpus → Virtual Corpus → Concrete Corpus
- VfS publication *Deutsche Sprachwelt (DSW)* with 4 issues per year
- All available holdings of the German National Library, i.e. from *DSW* 83/2021/1 to *DSW* 100/2025/2 = 18 issues = 4½ years (216 pages)
- Manual keyword identification
- Manual collection of words, phrases, sentences
- Manual, inductive coding
- Discourse analysis & results

# Integration of Earlier Research

- Using the aforementioned methodology, a comparable analysis of the VDS and its *SN* was published two years ago (Pfalzgraf 2024).
- For that, a total of 1223 relevant instances were extracted from the (concrete) VDS corpus, encompassing words, sentence fragments, and complete sentences.
- Based on subsequent inductive coding, 13 discourse categories within the VDS *SN* concerning gender-inclusive German language were identified.
- The present study builds on this approach by examining whether, and in what forms, similar discourses also manifest themselves in the publications of a second language protection association, namely the VfS and its *DSW*.
- To this end, the 13 discourse categories identified before are employed as a *heuristic system of categories*.

# A Heuristic System of 13 Categories

1. How people who support gender-inclusive German are described
2. How the use of gender-inclusive German is described
3. “It’s a German thing”
4. Use of gender-inclusive German as an illness
5. Use of gender-inclusive German as a communication barrier
6. “Thought control”
7. Pushing for the use of the generic masculine as *the* form of GIL
8. The “equality lie”
9. Anti-academic discourse
10. Discourses of violence and destruction
11. Gender-inclusive German as an oppressive ideology
12. Personal emotions are voiced
13. Positive attitudes towards the use of gender-inclusive German

# Heuristic System of 13 Categories: Examples

1. HOW PEOPLE WHO SUPPORT GENDER-INCLUSIVE GERMAN ARE DESCRIBED:  
gender lobby (*Genderlobby*), gender hotheads (*Gender-Wüteriche*),  
moral fundamentalists (*moralische Fundamentalisten*)
2. HOW THE USE OF GENDER-INCLUSIVE GERMAN IS DESCRIBED  
gibberish (*Kauderwelsch*), the gender-speak (*das Gendesprech*),  
use of the derogatory noun suffix ~ei (*die Genderei*)
3. “IT’S A GERMAN THING”  
hatred for our country (*Haß auf unser Land*), an artificially induced  
rejection of our nation (*künstlich injizierte Abkehr v. unserer Nation*)
4. USE OF GENDER-INCLUSIVE GERMAN AS AN ILLNESS  
gender-speak virus (*Gendersprechvirus*), gender madness  
(*Genderwahn*), the plague of our time (*die Seuche unserer Zeit*)

# Heuristic System of 13 Categories: Examples

5. USE OF GENDER-INCLUSIVE GERMAN AS A COMMUNICATION BARRIER  
Content and intelligibility become secondary (*Inhalt und Verständlichkeit treten in den Hintergrund*), a reading and speaking monstrosity (*Lese- und Sprech-Ungetüm*), erodes communication (*verödet die Kommunikation*), unintelligibility (*Unverständlichkeit*)
6. “THOUGHT CONTROL”  
[aim to] confuse (*verwirren*), to manipulate thinking through language (*mit Hilfe der Sprache das Denken zu lenken*), the cult-like gender-speak thought block (*die Gendersprechsektendenksperre*)
7. PUSHING FOR THE USE OF THE GENERIC MASCULINE AS THE FORM OF GIL  
the elimination of the generic masculine (*Abschaffung des generischen Maskulinums*), haters of the generic masculine (*Verächter des generischen Maskulinums*)

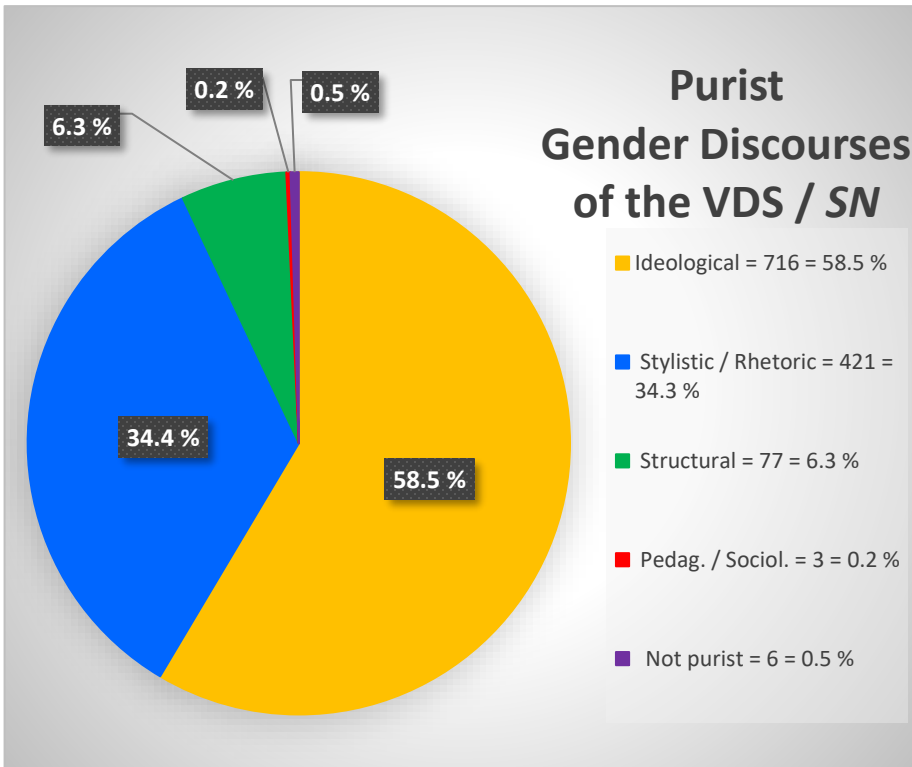
# Heuristic System of 13 Categories: Examples

8. THE “EQUALITY LIE”  
allegedly gender-inclusive (*vermeintlich geschlechtergerecht*)
9. ANTI-ACADEMIC DISCOURSE  
dreamt up in the ivory tower (Kind des akad. Elfenbeinturms)
10. DISCOURSES OF VIOLENCE AND DESTRUCTION  
dismantling (*Demontage*), wipe out (*ausmerzen*), culture war (*Kulturkampf*), gender battle groups (*Genderkampfgruppen*), ‘Star War’
11. GENDER-INCLUSIVE GERMAN AS AN OPPRESSIVE IDEOLOGY  
newspeak (*Neusprech*) [Owell/1984], re-education (*Umerziehung*), tyrannical/authoritarian (*diktatorisch*), paternalistic (*entmündigend*)
12. PERSONAL EMOTIONS ARE VOICED  
stressful (*belastend*), annoying (*ärgerlich*), irritating (*nervt*)
13. POSITIVE ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE USE OF GENDER-INCLUSIVE GERMAN  
only appear in letters to the *DSW*, sent by accused companies etc.

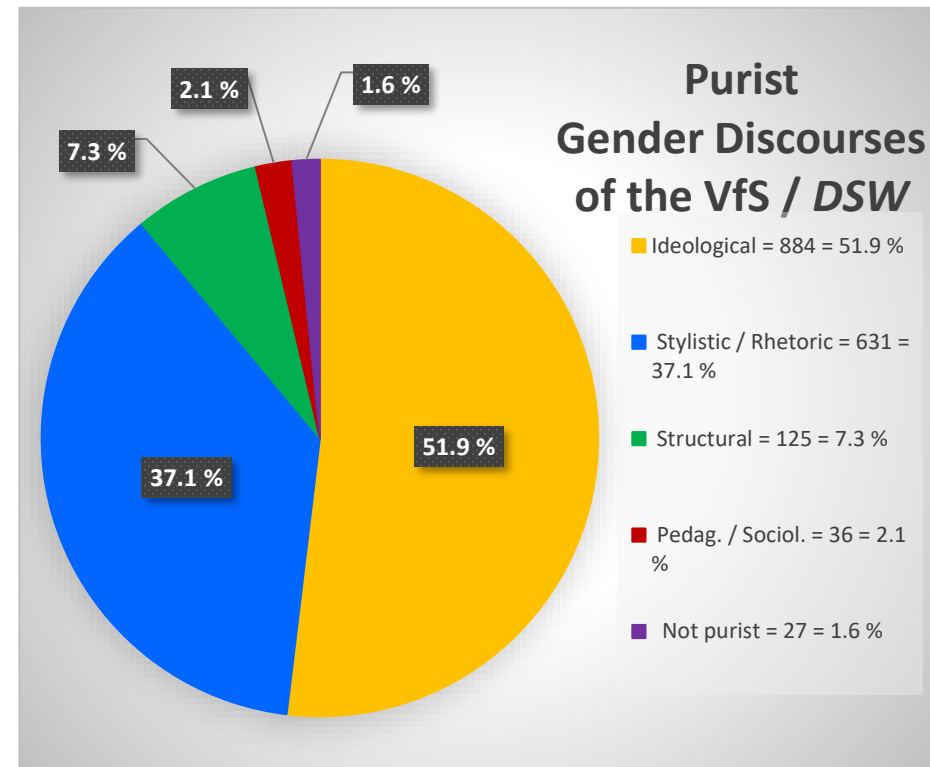
# Comparative analysis of discourse structure and typology

- The aim is thus *not* to replicate the earlier findings, but to examine the distribution and functional embedding of these discourses across two corpora.
- In line with the methodology outlined in the previous study, all 1703 instances were assigned to the four discourse types that are typical of linguistic purism, namely:
  1. the structural discourse
  2. the stylistic/rhetoric discourse
  3. the pedagogical/sociological discourse
  4. the ideological discourse
- This allows for a systematic comparison not only of the discourses themselves, but also of their typological configuration within purist discourse.

## 2024 Study



## Current Study



- High degree of structural similarity between the two corpora
- Opposition to GIL predominantly ideological discourse
- This is followed by stylistic/rhetorical discourse
- This confirms and extends the findings of the VDS study (Pfalzgraf 2024), according to which opposition to gender-inclusive language constitutes a distinctly ideological manifestation of linguistic purism

# Differences in functional differentiation

- The most striking divergence concerns pedagogical/sociological discourse: VDS: 0.2% vs. VfS: 2.1% ( $\approx$  tenfold increase)
- Although still quantitatively marginal, this indicates a functional expansion of the VfS discourses towards communication and social practice
- At the same time, the ideological discourse is slightly less dominant in the VfS corpus (51.9% vs. 58.5%), while the stylistic/rhetorical discourse is slightly stronger (37.1% vs. 34.4%)
- Overall, the comparison reveals both convergence and divergence:
  - opposition to GIL is firmly embedded in linguistic purism;
  - but the VfS discourses shows greater functional diversification and a slightly stronger rhetorical dimension

# (Interim) Conclusion

- The differences between the VDS and VfS corpora lie not in different discourses, but in their relative weighting and functional role. Also, certain discourse types are more visible in the VfS corpus: most notably the pedagogical/sociological discourse, and to a lesser extent stylistic/rhetorical discourse
- The ideological discourse clearly dominates in both corpora, which confirms that opposition to GIL is firmly rooted in linguistic purism. However, the VDS discourse shows a stronger ideological concentration, largely centred on ideological and stylistic/rhetorical argumentation.
- In contrast, the VfS discourses are more functionally diversified. The ideological discourse remains dominant, but additional ones are more visible: Particularly the pedagogical/sociological one (which is almost absent in the VDS corpus) appears more often; and the stylistic/ rhetorical one is slightly stronger.
- Overall, opposition to GIL emerges as a stable; but as an internally variable manifestation of (purist) discourses, characterised by shared core discourses that differ in their functional articulation.

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**Thank you  
for your attention**