

Bans on gender-inclusive language in Germany and Switzerland:

From State Policies to Local Practice

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In recent years, tensions over regulations and guidelines concerning gender-inclusive language have intensified. Several federal states in Germany have prohibited the use of gender symbols such as the gender star or the colon (Antidiskriminierungsstelle des Bundes 2024). Similarly, the Swiss federal chancellery issued statements in 2021 and 2023 prohibiting the use of such symbols in federal administration (Schweizerische Bundeskanzlei 2021, 2023). Nevertheless, studies show that such symbols are recommended increasingly frequently on a municipal level in Germany, and to a lesser extent also in Switzerland (Siegenthaler 2022, 2024).

In our presentation, we will focus on the domain of government and law by examining how national and regional bans interact with federal guidelines and municipal decisions. We analyse language guidelines from various German and Swiss cities to determine how they align with or challenge broader legislative regulations, and whether the backlash against gender-inclusive language – and gender symbols in particular – results in changed recommendations of specific forms.

We complement this discussion with empirical findings from a study on gender-inclusive language on city websites (2022-2024; Müller-Spitzer & Ochs 2023; Ochs, Manara & Müller-Spitzer under review). Our annotation of personal nouns on change-of-address and job pages of 42 German-speaking cities illustrates how local regulations and guidelines shape linguistic practice. Preliminary results suggest that municipal guidelines can influence actual language use at the city level, potentially overriding broader legislative regulations or adapting them to specific contexts. In short, city websites reveal the tension between top-down regulation and bottom-up linguistic agency.

Our study thus contributes to the growing research on gender-inclusive language by shedding light on the interaction between legislative regulations, language recommendations on a national and municipal level and actual language use.

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Biographies

Aline Siegenthaler is a research collaborator at the institute of plurilingualism in Freiburg/Fribourg (CH). She wrote her doctoral thesis, intitled “*Deutsch- und französischsprachige Leitfäden für gendersensible Sprache. Normierung und Variation in Hochschulen und Behörden.*”, at the University of Geneva. In her doctoral thesis, she focused on recommendations of French and German guidelines for inclusive language from different countries. Her current research includes a study on communicative competences in French as a foreign language in Switzerland as well as further research on gender-inclusive language and gender and language in a more general sense.

Samira Ochs is a PhD candidate and researcher at the Leibniz-Institute for the German Language in Mannheim, Germany. She works in the projects *Empirical Gender Linguistics* and *GENELLI*, focusing on corpus-based approaches to the classification and quantification of personal nouns in German. Her dissertation explores morphological and syntagmatic aspects of person reference, with particular attention to compounds, pair forms, gender symbols, and suffixation. She is also a member of the DFG network on queer linguistics, where she contributes corpus studies and quantitative methods.