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Gender-Inclusive Language Practices among Students in German Distance Education

Abstract:

In recent years, many organizations and universities have introduced gender-inclusive language guidelines. However, the concrete impact of such guidelines on students' language use remains largely unexplored. This question is particularly relevant in distance learning programs, where many students study part-time alongside their jobs and aim for future leadership roles. As such, they are likely to influence both academic and professional language practices. A representative survey of students and graduates from distance programs in Germany, investigates how institutional guidelines, supervisors' recommendations, and socio-demographic factors (e.g., gender, age, field of study) shape the language choices made in bachelor's and master's theses. The study also explores students' reasons for adopting or rejecting gender-neutral forms and the generic masculine in the context of current societal developments ("backlash"). The findings will provide insight into attitudes toward inclusive language and offer implications for teaching and policy at higher education institutions. Finally, the study aims to contribute to broader discussions of language change in academia and to highlight the role of students as agents of linguistic and thus social transformation.

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Bio:

Sonja Würtemberger is Professor of Human Resource Management at IU International University of Applied Sciences, where she also serves as Module Director for the medieval German literature and linguistics components of the B.A. program “Applied German Studies.” She obtained her doctorate from the University of Stuttgart in 2008 under the supervision of Hans Jürgen Scheuer. She holds an M.A. in German Studies and Comparative Linguistics and brings over twenty years of professional experience in business development, corporate communications, and human resources. Her academic and professional interests include leadership, diversity and inclusion, and change management.

Florian Perst is a lecturer in Marketing Management at IU International University of Applied Sciences. He obtained his doctorate in 2025 at Middlesex University in London. Prior to that, he earned a Bachelor's degree in Business Psychology, followed by four Master's degrees in Human Resource Management, Marketing, Digital Transformation, and Digital Banking. His core ambition is to connect theoretically grounded concepts with practical relevance, thereby building a bridge between academic research and business application – true to his motto: *Teaching is passion*.