

## Phonemicization of the glottal stop due to political correctness in German

Hubert Haider

Univ. Salzburg, Dept. of Linguistics & Centre for Neurocognitive Research

### Abstract

In standard German usage such as in public broadcasting and TV, the glottal stop has recently turned phonemic. Up to the present, it has been allophonic only. This change is an immediate consequence of politically correct gendering. As a consequence, since roughly a year and a half, the number of German phonemes has grown by one, viz. the glottal stop.

### Before the change

As for the phonemic status of the glottal stop in German, phonologists have been unanimous. In the words of Féry (2014:127), “*Der Glottalverschluss ist im Deutschen nicht phonemisch.*”<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the glottal stop is one of the most frequent speech sounds in German since it tends to precede the syllable-initial vowel of any stressed syllable. The particular pronunciation of the suddenly ubiquitous gendering suffix ‘-in’ in plurals has changed the situation.

Ever since gendering has become an issue of public profiling in Western civilizations, German has participated in this movement of symbolic actions.<sup>2</sup> The German language provides a well-equipped grammatical tool kit for devoted genderers, namely three grammatical genders, expressed on articles, nouns, and attributive adjectives and, in addition, it provides suffixes signifying differences in sex, such as “-in” for females:<sup>3</sup>

- (1) a. Feminist – Feministin  
feminist – feminist<sub>fem.</sub>  
b. Feministen – Feministinnen  
feminists – feminist<sub>fem.+pl.</sub>

A simple thing became complicated when bustling genderers eventually realized that homo sapiens apparently is not neatly partitioned in male and female specimens. At least psychosocially, there seem to exist conceptions of converse, hybrid or hermaphrodite gender identities. The sexual categorization of such persons lacks an adequate linguistic signification. Repair attempts readily produced the ‘gender star’ as a kind of albeit imperfect solution, as in (2):

- (2) Feminist\*innen  
feminist\*<sub>fem+plural</sub>  
feminists (collective, with any sexual identity whatever)

The immediate and obvious drawback of such an ingenious way out of a putative dilemma is this. The star grapheme signifying the universe of sexes does not correspond to a speech sound and so it is unpronounceable. Moreover, it can only be used in written German, thereby evidently discriminating against another sizeable group of already discriminated persons, namely

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<sup>1</sup> „The glottal stop is not phonemic in German.”

<sup>2</sup> Remember Karl Marx’s insight that interpreting the world differently does not change it. No empirical study measured the effect of then linguistic differentiation of sexes on changes of the social status. Presently, mandatory gendering is strongly repudiated by a majority of language users.

<sup>3</sup> Foreign suffixes indicating the category female have been imported together with foreign words: *Magistr-a*, *Hero-ine*; *Bachelor-ette*, *Steward-ess*, *Mass-euse*.

functional alphabets. This is the moment when the glottal stop entered the scene. News anchor personnel interpreted the star as a signal of phonetic disintegration. Consequently, the suffix “-in” got pronounced as a separated linguistic morpheme, which needs or warrants to be initiated in the phonetically standard way of German, namely by a glottal stop.

### After the change

Since the previous year, the plural of a group of females such as female feminists (3a) and the correctly gendered plural “feminists” (3b) is phonetically differentiated by means of a glottal stop.

- (3) a. Feministinnen – [fe:mɪni:stɪnən]  
       female feminists  
       b. Feminist\*innen – [fe:mɪni:stʔɪnən]  
       feminists (male, female, diverse, etc.)

Obviously, the difference between (3a) and (3b) is phonemic, given that a phoneme is a smallest unit of speech distinguishing one word (or word element) from another. The glottal stop in (3b) meets this definition. The suffix “-in” without glottal stop denotes the respective set of female referents while the variant with a glottal stop denotes the whole set, consisting of females, males, and all kinds of diverse identities. Consequently, the glottal stop is phonemic. It is the phoneme that differentiates minimal pairs such as (3a) and (3b).

Presently, the phonemic glottal stop in German is distributionally highly restricted, namely to the gendering suffix ‘-in’. It is hard to predict whether such whimsies will be long-lived.<sup>4</sup> In 2019, the “Verein Deutsche Sprache” (= Association for German Language) posted a plea signed by prominent figures of all colours for stopping the monkey-business of mandatory gendering.<sup>5</sup> At least, the glottal stop has not yet been generalized to other foreign gendering suffices such as ‘-esse’ or ‘-ette’, as in (4a,b):

- (4) a. Steward\*essen  
       stewards (male, female, or divers)  
       b. Pro\*etten  
       professionals (male, female, or divers)

The phonemicness of the glottal stop in German may be short-lived due to the foreseeable ephemerality of the gendering rage. In a lucid commentary<sup>6</sup> in a leading German newspaper, the linguist Heide Wegener has succinctly demonstrated why the equivocation of gender and sex is misleading, silly, and a typical ‘German’ concern. Why do people insist on gender as a mandatory category in referencing, and why not the color of eyes, the political conviction, the taxation category, the putative sexual preference, or – as in mediaeval or rural dress codes – the relationship status (e.g. unmarried, married, widowed, contractually incapable). Languages

<sup>4</sup> It may be short-lived since gendering in fact is sexist. Gendered language is sexist language. It insists on categorizing the reference to people in terms of their sexes in contexts in which sex does not matter at all. These situations are the majority of situations in everyday life.

<sup>5</sup> <https://vds-ev.de/gegenwartsdeutsch/gendersprache/gendersprache-unterschriften/schluss-mit-dem-gender-unfug/>

<sup>6</sup> „Sichtbar oder gleichwertig? Beim Gendern werden grammatisches und biologisches Geschlecht naiver Weise gleichgesetzt“. (Visible or equivalent. Gendering naively equivocates grammatical and biological gender). Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (Sept. 2<sup>nd</sup> 2021, p. 6).

with honorific systems produced a lot of categories for such purposes. In Austria, titles<sup>7</sup> serve as honorific terms when addressing people. This produces another gendering dilemma because of tautologies (5a,b) or contradictions (5c):<sup>8</sup>

- (5) a. *Frau Professorin* Ursula M. Staudinger<sup>9</sup>  
Mrs. professor<sub>female</sub> U.M.S.  
b. Sehr geehrte *Frau* Landeshaupt*frau*!<sup>10</sup>  
Very honored lady Province-governor-lady  
c. *Frau* Landeshaupt*männin*!<sup>11</sup>  
Mrs. Province-governor-man-female

Note that – as Heide Wegener emphasizes –nobody ever cares about signifying the biological gender of Geisel (hostage; fem.), Genie (genius; neuter), Koryphäe (luminary; fem.), Star (star; masc.) and numerous other nouns in German speaking countries.

From my personal experience as professor at a University, I learnt that there is a strong and significant correlation between the strength of the insistence on gendering and the modest length of the personal research bibliography of the respective proponents as well as their bibliometric index. No matter how successful or ephemeral the advancement to the category of German phonemes will be for the glottal stop, it will contribute to the amusement of the impartial observers.

## References

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- Möcker, Hermann (2001). *Landeshauptmann – Landeshauptfrau – Landesnebenfrau – Landeshauptmännin*. Ein „Problem“ *geschlechtsspezifischer Sprache*. In Friedbert Aspetsberger, & Konstanze Fliedl (eds.), *Geschlechter. Essays zur Gegenwartsliteratur*. Innsbruck: StudienVerlag.

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<sup>77</sup> In the old days, that is a century or more ago, ‘p.t.’ (= prämisso titulo) or ‘t.p.’ (titulo prämisso) in the address line of announcements served as signal of an adequate honorific prose: “preceded by the (adequate) title”.

<sup>8</sup> Another dilemma arises in compounds. Should “Bürgermeister” (= mayor; lit. citizens-master) be replaced by “Bürger\*innenmeister, or “Leserbrief” (letter to the editor; lit. reader letter) by “Leser\*innenbrief” or “Priester-mangel (priest shortage) by “Priester\*innenmangel.

<sup>9</sup> Inaugural ceremony for the rector of the TU Dresden, 21<sup>st</sup> September 2020.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVRvGKEfypM>

<sup>10</sup> Open letter to the provincial governor of Lower Austria: <https://klosterneuburg.spoe.at/artikel/offener-brief-die-landeshauptfrau-von-noe>

<sup>11</sup> The laws are surprisingly silent on the issue as to whether a female province governor has to be addressed as *Landeshauptmann*, *Landeshauptmännin* or *Landeshauptfrau* (Möcker 2001:89).