

Phonemicization of the glottal stop due to political correctness in German

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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 upshot 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.*”¹ Nonetheless, the glottal stop is one of the most frequent speech sounds in German since phonetically, it tends to introduce the syllable-initial vowel of any stressed syllable. The particular pronunciation of the suddenly ubiquitous gendering suffix ‘-in’ in plurals has changed the situation qualitatively.

Ever since gendering has become an issue of public profiling in Western civilizations, German has participated in this movement of symbolic actions.² Not only for linguistic gendering purposes, the German language makes available a well-equipped grammatical tool kit, namely three grammatical genders, expressed on articles, nouns, pronouns, and attributive adjectives and, in addition, it provides suffixes signifying differences in sex, such as “-in” for females:³

- (1) a. Feminist – Feministin
feminist – feminist_{fem.}
b. Feministen – Feministinnen
feminists – feminist_{fem.+pl.}

A simple thing became complicated when bustling gendering activists eventually realized that homo sapiens is not binarily assorted, that is, not neatly partitioned into male and female specimens. At least psycho-socially, there 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”⁴ as a kind of albeit imperfect solution, as in (2):

- (2) Feminist*innen
feminist*_{FEM+PLURAL}
,feminists’ (collective, with any sexual identity whatever)

¹ „The glottal stop is not phonemic in German.”

² Remember Karl Marx’s insight that merely interpreting the world differently does not change it. No empirical study measured the impact of the verbal differentiation of sex on the socio-economic status. Gendering does not narrow the gender pay gap. It is a cheap symbolic action that distracts from implementing effective changes. Mandatory gendering is repudiated by a majority of language users presently (see below).

³ Foreign suffixes indicating the category female have been imported together with foreign words: *Magistra*, *Heroine*; *Bachelorette*, *Stewardess*, *Friseurse*.

⁴ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_star

The immediate but obvious drawback of such an ingenious way out of a putative dilemma is this. The asterisk grapheme signifying binary as well as non-binary or genderqueer gender identities 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 functional analphabets. This is the moment when the glottal stop timely entered the scene. News anchor personnel has started to interpret the asterisk as a signal of phonetic disintegration. Consequently, the suffix “-in” gets 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 suffixed nouns denoting females (3a), such as female feminists, for example, and the politically correctly *gendered* plural “feminists” (3b) are phonetically differentiated by means of the glottal stop.⁵

- (3) a. Feministinnen – [feministnən]
 female feminists
 b. Feminist*innen – [feministʔnən]
 feminists (female, male, diverse, etc.)

Obviously, the difference between (3a) and (3b) is phonemic, given that a phoneme of a given language is the smallest distinctive unit of speech distinguishing one word (or morpheme) from another. The glottal stop in (3b) meets this definition. The suffix “-in” without glottal stop in (3a) denotes the respective set of female referents while the variant with a glottal stop (3b) denotes the entire set of feminists, consisting of females, males, and any kind of ‘non-binary’ identities. Consequently, the glottal stop suddenly qualifies as 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 confined to the gendering suffix ‘-in’. It is hard to predict whether such an intervention will be short-lived or not. In 2019, the “Verein Deutsche Sprache” (= Association for German language) posted a plea signed by prominent figures of all stripes for stopping the “monkey-business of mandatory gendering”.⁶ In any case, 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 | b. Baron*essen |
| stewards (male, female, or divers) | barons (male, female, or divers) |
| c. Pro*etten | d. Bachelor*etten |
| professionals (male, female, or divers) | bachelors (male, female, or diverse) |

Alternative accounts?

The conjecture on the out-of-the-blue phonemicity of the glottal stop ventured in this squib still needs to be grounded beyond doubt by extensive fieldwork. Presently, the allegedly phonemic distribution is – as mentioned above – still narrowly restricted. So, alternative approaches have

⁵ In German, it is named “*Gender-Pause*” (gender pause); see <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender-Pause>. For sound samples you may consult the web, e.g.: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8aoofBP2Bg> (Sept. 25,2021).

⁶ <https://vds-ev.de/gegenwartsdeutsch/gendersprache/gendersprache-unterschriften/schluss-mit-dem-gender-unfug/>

to be duly taken into consideration. Michael Wagner and Caroline Féry generously informed me by mail about their analyses. According to Wagner (2021), the gendering glottal stop signals lexically unannounced coordination. As illustrated in (5), the asterisk grapheme and its phonetic realization as glottal stop are a signal of the (word-internal) application of coordination reduction, with (5b) underlying (5a):

- (5) a. Koordinator*innen
 coordinators (= male, female and diverse ones).
 b. ~~Koordinator_{en} und Koordinator_{innen}~~
 coordinators ~~and coordinator~~_{fem-S}

However, what this analysis fails to capture is the fact that the gender asterisk is meant to cover not only male and female identities, as in the case of its predecessor, viz. the slash as in “Koordinator/innen”, but it additionally subsumes all kinds of ‘non-binary’, diverse identities. Crucially, (5a) and (5b) do not have an identical denotation therefore. They are not synonymous, and hence the coordination analysis is empirically not adequate.

Caroline Féry sums up her position as follows. What apparently has changed is the fact that (the suffix) “-in” has acquired the status of a prosodic word (“*Was sich anscheinend geändert hat, ist, dass -in den Status eines prosodischen Worts erreicht hat*”). Thus, the difference between (5a) and (6a) is one in terms of prosodic word boundaries, as indicated in (6b,c), with (6c) corresponding to (5a), and (6b) to (6a). (6c) is structured like a compound⁷ and unlike the suffixal structure (6b).

- (6) a. Koordinatorinnen
 coordinators_{femal}
 b. [Koordinatorinnen]_ω
 c. Koordinator[in]_ωen

What this account entails is that “-in” is a homophonous morpheme. On the one hand it is the established suffix for deriving nouns exclusively referring to *females*. On the other hand, it is a suffix which is both a bound morpheme and a phonological word at the same time and used for non-binarily referring to *diverse* identities. The crucial question related to the role of the glottal stop in this context remains open, however. Nevertheless, it would be an elegant solution: The gendering suffix “-in” differs from its homophonous variant which denotes female referents in its status as a phonological word. The general gendering “-in” is a minimal phonological word, while the other suffix “-in” is not. Therefore, a glottal stop precedes an initial vowel, as in any phonological word. So, the glottal stop would be a phonologically/phonetically conditioned effect rather than a phoneme that differentiates minimal pairs.

As attractive as this analysis may seem at first sight, it leaves us with a nontrivial problem. How could a light syllable become a prosodic word? The suffix “-in” is a light VC syllable, with a short, unstressed vowel. Anyway, stress would not make a difference (see fn. 8). A stressed

⁷ Note, however, that in a German N-N compound, the word stress is expressed on the first N of the compound, as in i. and ii. Consequently, as can be checked with (ii), a glottal stop is not obligatorily triggered on the initial consonant of the second noun, viz. *Ente* (except for a word-by-word dictating-style pronunciation).

i. Männweib (man-woman; ‘virago’)
 ii. Kólbente (poppet-duck; ‘red-crested pochard’)

suffix “-in”, as illustrated by (7), does not attract a glottal stop as phonetic introducer. The contrastively stressed “-in” is not initiated with a glottal stop.

(7) War es ein Täter oder eine Täterin? – Eine TäterIN!

was it a perpetrator or a perpetrator_{fem}? – a perpetrator_{FEM}!

Féry (1996:88) discusses the stress-shifting behavior⁸ of the very suffix “-in” in German and illustrates it with the examples in (8), with an accent indicating the stressed vowel:

- (8) a. Proféssor/Professórin, Diréktor/Direktórin (shifted stress)
 b. Músiker/Músikerin, Éngländer/Éngländerin (unshifted stress)

Crucially, the stress-shifting behavior of ‘-in’ or ‘-innen’ (= ‘in’ + plural) does not change in the version of the ‘-in’-suffix preceded by a glottal stop. This means that the original suffix ‘in’ and its recent offspring, viz. the glottal-stop ‘-in’, behave exactly alike. This is unexpected if one is a phonological word while the other is a light syllable representing a suffix only.

So, for the time being, I feel legitimated to adhere to my initial conjecture: The glottal stop is phonemic⁹ at least in the phonological form of the contrasting pair “-*in” and “-in”.

Side note

The phonemicity of the gendering glottal stop in German may, alas, be short-lived due to the foreseeable ephemerality of the verbal gendering enthusiasm since other means will surely prove more effective in removing factual discrimination. Recently, in a commentary¹⁰, the linguist Heide Wegener has succinctly demonstrated why the equivocation of gender and sex is misleading.¹¹ Moreover, why should people be compelled to focus on gender as a mandatory category in referencing, and why not on the color of eyes, the political conviction, the putative sexual preference, or – as in mediaeval or rural dress codes – the relationship status (unmarried, engaged, married, widowed)?

Languages with honorific systems hold a lot of categories in readiness for such purposes. In Austria, titles¹² serve as much-liked honorific terms when addressing people. This produces another gendering dilemma because of tautologies (9a,b) or contradictions (9c):¹³

- (9) a. *Frau Professorin Ursula M. Staudinger*¹⁴
 Mrs. professor_{female} U.M.S.

⁸ The kind of suffix (free vs. bound) preceding ‘-in’ determines the stress shift (Féry 1996:88).

⁹ Féry 2014:15): “In a given language, a speech sound is a phoneme if is distinctive, that is, there are minimal pairs only distinguished by the very sound.”

¹⁰ „Sichtbar oder gleichwertig? Beim Gendern werden grammatisches und biologisches Geschlecht in naiver Weise gleichgesetzt“. (Visible or equivalent. Gendering naively equivocates grammatical and biological gender). Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (Sept. 2nd 2021, p. 6).

¹¹ “Die Gleichsetzung von Genus und Geschlecht ist falsch und dumm.“ (,The equivocation of grammatical gender and biological sex is wrong and silly.)

¹² 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”.

¹³ Another dilemma manifests itself inside complex words. Should “Bürgermeister” (= mayor; lit. citizens-master) be replaced by “Bürger*innenmeister”, or “Leserbrief” (letter to the editor; lit. reader letter) by “Leser*innenbrief” or “Priestermangel” (priest shortage) by “Priester*innenmangel”, “Heldentum” (heroism; lit. heroes-dom) by “Held*innentum”, or “Damenmannschaft” (lit. ladies-men-ship) by “Damenfrauschaft” (lit. ladies-woman-ship), or dumped in favor of “Damenteam”?

¹⁴ Inaugural ceremony for the rector of the TU Dresden, 21st September 2020.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVRvGKEfypM>

- b. Sehr geehrte *Frau Landeshauptfrau*¹⁵
very honored Mrs. Province-governor-Mrs.
- c. Frau Landeshauptmännin¹⁶
Mrs. Province-governor-man-female

Note, moreover, that – as Heide Wegener emphasizes – people who insist on consequent linguistic gendering are in fact inconsequent since in German speaking countries, nobody has ever insisted on (or bothered) signifying the biological gender of nouns such as *Genie* (neuter; genius), *Geisel* (fem.; hostage), *Model* (neuter; model), *Putzteufel* (masc.; maniac for housework), *Koryphäe* (fem.; luminary), *Kanaille* (fem.; scoundrel), *Star* (masc., star, as in pop star), and numerous other foreign nominals. Attempts of gendering *Mitglied*¹⁷ (neuter; ‘member’) have been discouraged by a prescriptive Grammar of German, the Duden.¹⁸

Bottom line

The first step towards the phonemicization of the glottal stop in German, as described above, is a virtually instantaneous phonological change provoked by fiat. The present situation is still diglossic since the politically correct positioning of the glottal stop is mainly confined to public speech but mostly smiled at in every-day conversation.¹⁹

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¹⁵ Open letter to the governor of the province of Lower Austria: <https://klosterneuburg.spoe.at/artikel/offener-brief-die-landeshauptfrau-von-noe>

¹⁶ The law is surprisingly silent on the issue as to whether a female province governor (governess?) has to be properly addressed as *Landeshauptmann*, *Landeshauptmännin* or *Landeshauptfrau* (Möcker 2001:89).

¹⁷ https://www.google.de/search?q=%22Mitglieder+und+Mitgliederinnen%22&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewjugJLksLjzAhXX_rsIHeg9AIEQ_AUoAX-oECAEQAw&biw=1400&bih=762&dpr=2#imgrc=-g1wDiE1khI4JM

¹⁸ <https://www.duden.de/sprachwissen/sprachratgeber/%E2%80%9ELiebe-Mit%2%ADglieder%2%ADinnen-und-Mit%2%ADglieder%2%80%9C-%E2%80%93Personen%2%AD%2%ADbezeich%2%ADnungen>

¹⁹ In a poll of the German TV company ZDF (July 16th 2021, Politbarometer, ZDFheute), with a random sample of 1224 participants, only 25% approved the usage of slashes or gender stars, 71% disliked it, while 4% abstained. Here is a probe into public opinion: <https://www.mactechnews.de/forum/discussion/Wie-kann-ich-das-Gendergaga-unter-iOS-15-abstellen-344907.html>

In Bavarian legal texts, gender asterisks are not admitted (source: Text message of the Bavarian broadcasting company Bayerischer Rundfunk, Sept. 21, 2021). The gender guidelines of Bavarian universities are under scrutiny by the ministry (<https://www.br.de/nachrichten/bayern/gendersternchen-leitlinien-von-bayerns-unis-werden-ueberprueft,Sj53zJm>). The Prime Minister of Bavaria emphasizes: “*Sprache ist frei*” (‘language is free’): <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article233931802/Markus-Soeder-Gendern-darf-nicht-zu-einer-Ueberforderung-fuehren.html>