

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.*”¹ 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.² 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:³

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

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*_{FEM+PLURAL}
 , 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

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

² Remember Karl Marx’s insight that interpreting the world differently does not change it. No empirical study measured the effect of the verbal differentiation of sexes on their socio-economic status. Anyway, mandatory gendering is strongly repudiated by a majority of language users presently.

³ 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 timely entered the scene. News anchor personnel agreed to interpret 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 suffixed nouns denoting females (3a), such as female feminists, for example, and the correctly *gendered* plural “feminists” (3b) is phonetically differentiated by means of the glottal stop.⁴

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

Obviously, the difference between (3a) and (3b) is phonemic, given that a phoneme is the smallest unit of speech distinguishing one word (or word element) from another semantically. 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 diverse identities. Consequently, the glottal stop has become phonemic. It is the phoneme that differentiates minimal pairs such as (3a) and (3b).

Presently, the – all of a sudden – phonemic glottal stop in German is distributionally highly restricted, namely confined to the gendering suffix ‘-in’. It is hard to predict whether such a whimsey will be long-lived.⁵ 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
stewards (male, female, or divers)
b. Pro*etten
professionals (male, female, or divers)

The phonemicness of the glottal stop in German is likely to be short-lived due to the foreseeable ephemerality of the gendering enthusiasm. In a lucid commentary⁷ 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-culture concern. Why would people insist on gender as a mandatory category in referencing, and why not on the color of eyes, the political

⁴ In German, it is named “*Gender-Pause*” (gender pause); see <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender-Pause>.

⁵ 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.

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

⁷ „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).

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 with honorific systems hold a lot of categories in readiness for such purposes. In Austria, titles⁸ serve as much-liked honorific terms when addressing people. This produces another gendering dilemma because of tautologies (5a,b) or contradictions (5c):⁹

- (5) a. *Frau Professorin* Ursula M. Staudinger¹⁰
 Mrs. professor_{female} U.M.S.
 b. Sehr geehrte *Frau* Landeshaupt*frau*!¹¹
 very honored Mrs. Province-governor-Mrs.
 c. Frau Landeshaupt*männin*¹²
 Mrs. Province-governor-man-female

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

At this point, I am incapable of withholding an aside: From my personal experience as academic, I have 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 an indirectly proportional relation with the respective score in bibliometric indices. However, 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.

Bottom line

The phonemicization of the glottal stop in German 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 everyday conversation.¹³

References

Fery, Caroline (2014). *Phonetik und Phonologie*. In: Jakob Ossner und Heike Zinsmeister (Eds.), Sprachwissenschaft für das Lehramt. 121-156. Paderborn: Schöningh (UTB).

⁸ 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”.

⁹ 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”?

¹⁰ Inaugural ceremony for the rector of the TU Dresden, 21st September 2020.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVRvGKEfypM>

¹¹ Open letter to the governor of the province of Lower Austria: <https://klosterneuburg.spoee.at/artikel/offener-brief-die-landeshauptfrau-von-noe>

¹² 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).

¹³ In a poll of the German broadcasting 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.

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