

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 outcome 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 binarily assorted, that is, not neatly partitioned into male and female specimens. At least psycho-socially, 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 asterisk 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,

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.

namely functional alphabets. This is the moment when the glottal stop timely entered the scene. News anchor personnel started 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 – [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 a whimsy 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)

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. Presently, the allegedly phonemic distribution is – as mentioned above – still narrowly restricted. So, alternative approaches need to be taken into consideration. Michael Wagner and Caroline Féry generously inform me by mail about their analyses. According to Wagner (2020), the gendering glottal stop signals lexically unannounced coordination. As illustrated in (5), the asterisk grapheme and its phonetic realization as glottal stop signal a word-internal application of coordination reduction, with (5b) underlying (5a):

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/>

- (5) a. Koordinator*innen
coordinators (= male, female and diverse ones).
b. Koordinatoren ~~und Koordinatorinnen~~
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 also subsumes all kinds of ‘non-binary’, diverse identities. Crucially, (5a) and (5b) do not have an identical denotation. They are not synonymous, and therefore 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).

- (6) a. Koordinatorinnen
coordinators_{female}
b. [Koordinatorinnen]_ω
c. Koordinator[innen]_ω

What this account implies is that “-in” is a polysemic morpheme. On the one hand it is the established suffix for deriving nouns referring to females. On the other hand, it is a suffix which is both a bound morpheme and a phonological word and is used for referring to diverse identities. So, the crucial question related to the role of the glottal stop in this context remains open. 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 precedes an initial vowel, as in any phonological word. So, the glottal stop would be a phonologically 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 weak syllable become a prosodic word? The suffix “-in” is a light syllable since it is an open syllable with a short vowel. Stress would not change the situation. A stressed suffix “-in” does not get preceded by a glottal stop, as illustrated by (7). The contrastively stressed “-in” follows without an intervening glottal stop.

- (7) War es ein Täter oder eine Täterin? – Eine TäterIN!
was it a perpetrator or a perpetrator_{fem}? – a perpetrator_{FEM}!

In Féry (1996:88), she discusses the stress-shifting behavior⁷ of the very suffix “-in” in German and illustrates it with the examples in (8), with the accent indicating the stressed vowel:

- (8) a. Proféssor/Professorin, Diréktor/Direktórin
b. Músiker/Músikerin, Éngländer/Éngländerin

⁷ The kind of suffix (free vs. bound) preceding ‘-in’ determines the stress shift (Féry 1996:88).

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 phonemic⁸ 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 be short-lived due to the foreseeable ephemerality of the gendering enthusiasm. In a lucid commentary⁹ in a leading German newspaper, the linguist Heide Wegener has succinctly demonstrated why the equivocation of gender and sex is misleading, silly,¹⁰ and a typical German-culture concern. Howsoever, why should people want to insist 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 (e.g. unmarried, married, widowed, contractually incapable)?

Languages with honorific systems hold a lot of categories in readiness for such purposes. In Austria, titles¹¹ serve as much-liked honorific terms when addressing people. This produces another gendering dilemma because of tautologies (5a,b) or contradictions (5c):¹²

- (5) a. *Frau Professorin* Ursula M. Staudinger¹³
Mrs. professor_{female} U.M.S.
b. Sehr geehrte *Frau* Landeshaupt*frau*!¹⁴
very honored Mrs. Province-governor-Mrs.
c. *Frau* Landeshaupt*männin*!¹⁵
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 a German speaking country, nobody has ever insisted on (or bothered) signifying the biological gender of nouns such as *Geisel* (fem.; hostage), *Genie* (neuter; genius), *Putzteufel* (masc.; maniac for housework), *Koryphäe* (fem.;

⁸ 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.”

⁹ „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).

¹⁰ “Die Gleichsetzung von Genus und Geschlecht ist falsch und dumm.“

¹¹ 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”.

¹² 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”?

¹³ Inaugural ceremony for the rector of the TU Dresden, 21st September 2020.

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

¹⁴ Open letter to the governor of the province of Lower Austria: <https://klosterneuburg.spoe.at/artikel/offener-brief-die-landeshauptfrau-von-noe>

¹⁵ 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).

luminary), *Star* (masc., star, as in pop star), *Kanaille* (fem.; scoundrel), and numerous other foreign nominals in German speaking countries.

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.¹⁶

References

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¹⁶ 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.