@ the crossroads of advocacy & grammar: Teaching neopronouns in the German language classroom

by

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B.A., Kansas State University, 2018

A REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Modern Languages
College of Arts and Sciences

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2024

Approved by:

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Abstract

Language and gender as social constructs are in flux and come into intersection in the language classroom. When language teachers go about discussing the notions of gender and grammatical gender, if they are not careful, their words can contribute to the reification and perpetuation of the violent and exclusionary designs from the past. Instead of ignoring or avoiding opportunities to discuss structural and systemic erasure of people who are gender non-conforming, there is an imperative for teachers to do the opposite: demonstrate the flexibility of language for their students to include those who do not fit into the gender binary, illustrate how language can empower people to develop their identities and opinions, and showcase the differences and similarities between the cultures in which those languages are spoken. This is because the goals of the foreign language classroom must be oriented around students' abilities to express themselves authentically and should foster their development of appropriate and respectful behavior when communicating with others in a constantly changing world. This paper surveys current discourses on gender and grammatical gender and suggests a possible framework for use of gender non-specific language, especially pronouns, in the foreign language classroom.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the help from many people who have contributed to and facilitated my education. Thank you to my family, for their unremitting love, support, and for affording me the opportunity to receive a formal education, my friends, who encouraged me to live authentically and who provided me respite on dreary days, and to my teachers, whose lessons I will carry closely with me into the future. Thank you to Brandon Haddock, Dr. Rachel Levitt, and Dr. Jason Wilby, who provided guidance and helpful advice which directed me in the early stages of my research. I wish to extend a special thank you to Dr. Elke Lorenz, my high school German teacher, who painstakingly fostered my introduction to the German language, Dr. Sara Luly, who cultivated a path for me through the gothic mysteries of German folklore and culture, Dr. Derek Hillard, whose courses provided a healthy and balanced regimen to discover the exciting tragedies and comedies of German literature and society, and last, but not least, thank you to Dr. Necia Chronister, my major professor, whose patience, diligence, kindness, and wisdom have been a tremendous blessing as well as an inexhaustible source of encouragement, inspiration, and academic development.

Introduction

Students today receive damaging and deceiving input about gender from the media. Personalities such as Piers Morgan, Jordan Peterson, Andrew Tate, Dennis Prager, etc. pose as authorities on issues regarding gender. Instead of researching gender by gathering data from a diverse range of humanity, they tend to purposefully ignore those who are in the margins, in between, or who are not categorizable, as though they were some kind of aberrance or error. This oversimplification and censorship of those who are not cis gender throws into doubt the capacity of transgender or gender non-conforming individuals to express and know themselves.

Developing and maintaining classroom practices that support students and their ability to advocate for themselves should be a priority. As is stated by Caitlyn Clark et al. in the book *Trans Studies in K-12 Education: Creating an Agenda for Research and Practice*, "For LGBTQ students in general, prior research has shown that having supportive educators can be the most powerful school-based support, relating to lower levels of anti-LGBTQ violence, increased student self-esteem, and greater educational engagement" (84). Teachers have the opportunity to restore students' sense of self-confidence, self-worth, and self-awareness by valuing them as valid members of the classroom community and giving them the opportunity to be heard. Having teachers who are supportive of their LGBTQ+ students not only helps those students, but it also signals other students what behavior is expected of them while teaching them the value of diversity.

As is summarized by Elizabeth Meyer et al. in the same volume,

> Results from the 2015 National Transgender Discrimination Survey indicate that 77 percent of respondents […] had experienced some form of mistreatment in K-12 settings based on their expressed transgender identity or gender nonconformity and 17 percent

> reported leaving a K-12 school due to the severity of mistreatment. […] In the 2019 National School Climate survey, [GLSEN] reported that 57 percent of LGBTQ youth experienced verbal harassment based on their gender expression and 21 percent were physically harassed based on their gender expression. (140)

These statistics should illustrate how prevalent transphobia is and how measured the response to transphobia needs to be. Everybody benefits when environments are intolerant of intolerance, and when teachers model tolerance and acceptance toward their students, they provide a safe haven and an environment which is conducive to learning for all.

A deeper look into the 2015 National Transgender Discrimination Survey, authored by Grant et al., indicates our shortcomings as a society and how the educational system is failing these individuals. In their findings, they report that, "Seventy-eight percent (78%) of the 1,876 respondents who expressed a transgender identity or gender non-conformity in grades K-12 reported harassment by students, teachers or staff […] violence in the form of physical assault by either a peer or teacher/staff member (35%) or a sexual assault (12%). Six percent (6%) reported expulsion due to their gender identity/expression" (36). In the same study, Grant et al. report, "A staggering 41% of respondents reported attempting suicide compared to 1.6% of the general population" (72). Because they are ostracized, marginalized, or inferiorized by society at large, transgender, gender-non-conforming, and gender non-binary students are more vulnerable to bullying and violence in school.

The burden of preventing these damaging social attitudes from filtering into our schools lies in the hands of adults. Instilling a sense of belonging and acceptance in schools might help encourage victims to come forward when they experience this violence. This might help to reduce violence in the future and may prevent later death by suicide among those who do not

identify according to the designs of heteronormativity. With this information and statistics on school retention rates in mind, it becomes clear that gender affirming language and anti-bullying practices should be considered as indispensable facets of classroom policy and management as well as in curriculum design.

This paper was written in the spring of 2024 as a part of my master's program at Kansas State University in German Literature on my way to becoming a German teacher. While at KSU, I learned a great deal about the value of representation in classroom materials, as well as the importance of making those materials accessible and relevant for students who are members of historically marginalized groups. I noticed that most of the work involving diversity, visibility, and representation provided generalized information for teachers, but fell short when informing me about how I should cover the issue of gender in my own classroom, especially because the German language has certain blind spots when it comes to gender neutrality.

This seemed odd, considering the level of openness and acceptance I experienced as a gay white man when studying in Germany as an undergraduate. Germany and its storied history with LGBTQ+ people would seem to position it as a leader when it comes to making up for past injustices and forging a path toward a peaceful, tolerant future. While it is not the focus of this paper, perhaps the diminished role of German society in this dimension of activism can somehow be explained in the process of expanding this discourse, though further, more deliberate research on that issue is warranted. This paper will focus instead on the teaching of the German language and is intended to inform teachers in the United States, where English is the most common language.

As indicated earlier, teachers of foreign languages who wish to honor their students' gender identities may quickly find out that doing so can be a challenge. Some of the pronouns

that are used in the United States have not yet entered public awareness or discourse in other countries. Gender non-specific language is becoming more common, but many languages are rigidly gendered. This paper seeks to make the case for teaching gender non-binary language, by first examining the importance of visibility and representation in classroom materials, secondly, by mapping out the linguistic landscape surrounding gender neutrality, and thirdly, by discussing pedagogical challenges and possible remedies associated with gender neutral language. After that, I will present a set of guidelines as indicated by my research for teachers of German to implement when designing and teaching future classes.

Belonging in the Classroom

A good practice in general is to provide classroom materials which increase the visibility of marginalized groups of people. Regardless of whether there are members of those marginalized groups present in the classroom or not, materials that enable students to see other perspectives promote empathy within the classroom as well as critical thinking. Rudine Sims Bishop writes in her article, “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors,” about representation in the classroom literature provided to students. She says, “When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part” (1). Texts used in the classroom can be mirrors, when a reader sees themselves represented in the story, as a window, where readers see others represented, or as a sliding glass door, where readers are encouraged to step into the identities of the characters presented to them. This idea is important for teachers to consider. The representation of various groups has changed over time, and providing students with material that reinforces racist or prejudicial ideologies likely outweighs the merit in providing those materials in the first place.

As is stated by Kaitlin M. Jackson in her article, “When Diversity Isn’t the Point: Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors in the Classroom,” “Another advantage of choosing and providing mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors is the normalization that comes with featuring characters who do not match the societal default of a white, upper-middle class, able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender, male, Christian individual” (56). For students, seeing a new perspective may inform them of a fact of which they had no awareness, and teach them the value of listening to people who do not share a common background. This presents an opportunity for students to admit their ignorance on an issue and perhaps to practice their humility by admitting

that they were wrong. For students who belong to groups represented in these texts, the feeling of visibility itself functions as validation of their identity and their membership in a society that welcomes and affirms their perspectives and existence as valid.

Visibility in classroom materials provides students with a more robust understanding of the world and the people in it. For able-bodied language students, it may never occur to them that they might need to use the word for wheelchair, hearing-aid, cane, or sign language in their second language. Students who live in homogenous, rural areas might not need the words to describe people of other ethnicities in their daily lives, but learning how to use the language respectfully might pay off for them if they ever went abroad, went to a bigger city, or chatted with somebody online. Good classroom materials help to facilitate those questions and discussions, broadening students' perspectives without having to leave the classroom.

Aside from these reasons, the main reason to provide students with material that represents a variety of groups is to promote the wellbeing and learning of students who belong to marginalized groups. When students see themselves represented in classroom materials, that material transforms from being hypothetical and perhaps even inapplicable to being interesting and relevant. This helps students to engage with the material on a more personal level, and, most importantly, affirms that they belong in the classroom community. Instead of looking at pictures in a book as though they were windows into another culture, when they see people who look like them or who share facets of their identities, those windows can become mirrors, enabling students to reflect on their identities and their sense of belonging. Failure to represent diverse identities in classroom materials reifies and normalizes the marginalization we see in society, enabling violent externalities to enter into the classroom. These externalities are obstacles between students and their future goals.

Teachers should prevent these externalities from entering the classroom wherever they can. Subjects and materials focused on in the classroom are more or less selected by a teacher, which means that the role of a teacher's ideology concerning education is paramount. bell hooks remarks upon this in her book *Teaching to Transgress* when she discusses the challenges of dismantling systems of erasure in curricula. "[...] no education is politically neutral. Emphasizing that a white male professor in an English department who teaches only work by 'great white men' is making a political decision, we had to work consistently against and through the overwhelming will on the part of folks to deny the politics of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and so forth that inform how and what we teach" (37). This quote would seem to illuminate the role of the education system as it has been used as an instrument to silence the oppressed and marginalized. Presenting only one perspective to students, especially the perspectives used to justify the atrocities of colonialism, slavery, or the holocaust do nothing to prevent the perpetuation of those atrocities on their own. The perspectives and voices which are presented to students should therefore be chosen in a highly intentional manner, recognizing that even the most politically neutral approach to teaching a language is still vulnerable to bias and blind spots in a teacher's perspective and students' understanding.

People who do not align with the social construct of gender have always existed, but systematic erasure and denial of their existence has led to the conception that this is somehow a recent phenomenon. Judith Butler discusses the problem of idealism in her book *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. There, she states, "[...] 'sex' is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. It is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize 'sex' and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms. That this reiteration is necessary is a sign that

materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled" (1-2). In other words, every man and woman who has ever existed cannot meet each of the ideals of perfect masculinity or femininity as it is put forth by society. It begs the question of why these ideals even exist. The answer would seem to be that these ideals exist in order to enable the censure, marginalization, and erasure of those who, for whatever reason, are deemed to be unfit.

Representing students' identities in classroom materials contributes to a welcoming atmosphere which values learning over discipline. Megan Biondi emphasizes the importance of this atmosphere in her article "Teaching for Equity and Inclusion in the Community College World Language Classroom." She writes, "It has in fact been proven that 'neurobiologically, students can't learn if they don't feel safe, known, and cared for within their schools' (Aupperle et al., 2012, as cited in Minahan, 2020) because 'the brain's capacity develops most fully when (...) youth feel emotionally and physically safe' (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018)" (29)[1]. When students do not feel confident enough to speak in the classroom, the number of ways for teachers to diagnose issues and facilitate their learning of the L2 diminishes. When students feel uncomfortable asking clarificatory questions about pronouns, they may struggle to express those pronouns with confidence later on. Furthermore, the way that pronoun instruction is handled goes beyond the mere acquisition of a grammatical concept. Our action (or inaction) as teachers may also serve to reify the taboo status of these words and the people they represent.

[1] Darling-Hammond, L. & Cook-Harvey, C. (2018). Educating the whole child: Improving school climate to support student success. Learning Policy Institute, 1, 1-81.
Minahan, J. (2020). Trauma-informed teaching strategies. Educational Leadership, 77 (2), 30-35.

What ultimately results from tabooization, implicit or explicit, is the apparent justification and normalization of exclusionary attitudes.

Processes of marginalization and erasure persist today, even within the LGBTQ+ community. Susan Stryker writes in her article for the New York Times, “All along, however, non-trans gays and lesbians considered transgender issues to be more marginal, more deviant, less respectable and less important. Some find us threatening to their own sense of self, express open hostility, and disparage us as weird, sick, or misguided” (Stryker). Despite the common inclusion of the “T” in LGBTQ+, Stryker’s statement indicates that inclusion must go beyond the mere listing of a letter of the alphabet. Furthermore, the notion that transgender is an afterthought or included to act as a token should stand out as problematic. Indeed, whereas lesbian, gay, and bisexual are all sexual orientations, transgenderism has nothing to do with sexual orientation. The fact that this ‘T’ is tacked on at the end like an afterthought, not taking a larger role in the discourse of ‘gay rights,’ demonstrates the enormous amount of prejudice and systematic erasure which continues to stand against the trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming community.

While it is likely the case that students are already aware of the school’s policies before they enter the language classroom, it should nevertheless be made clear to each of them that the classroom is a safe space, and why that is important to respect. Besides preparing them for life as members of society, maintaining an atmosphere of respect and kindness allows students to devote their energy toward their education. Especially in the language classroom, students should be allowed to make mistakes, but when it comes to hate speech and inappropriate language, it is the responsibility of the teacher to put an end to it as soon as it happens. The use of language designed to convey violent intentions, especially when directed toward a person, should not be tolerated under any circumstance. In texts where troublesome words are found, teachers may

demonstrate to students that skipping the word while leaving a pause is the wisest course of action.

A simple effort such as hanging a rainbow flag in the classroom may be the reminder a student needs to be respectful and kind to themselves and others. Beyond that, and beyond seeing transgender people represented in their classroom materials, the reinforcement of gender inclusive language can also help to maintain a sense of security for students. Implementing and practicing guidelines for non-gendered speech enables students to extend courtesies to their classmates and communities at large and facilitates in building relationships among members of the classroom. Taking the time and care to establish a safe space but then neglecting to make sure that every student feels like they belong defeats the purpose.

The Fluidity of Language

A chief area of concern for this paper is the discrepancy which arises as the result of tension between prescriptivism and descriptivism. In linguistics, prescriptivism describes an approach for defining language in a way that prioritizes how a language ought to be used. One may think of the grammar rules they learned about in school and think of propriety when considering the prescriptive approach. Descriptivism, on the other hand, would tend to define language by the way that it is used. Instead of prescribing rules for speakers to follow, the descriptivist describes language by how its speakers use it. Designing lessons with a descriptive approach in mind helps to reinforce the importance of the lesson. Given that one of the most common questions in the German language classroom is, 'do they really say that?' a descriptive approach eliminates the complicated or esoteric arguments employed in a prescriptive approach altogether.

It is important for language teachers to be aware of this tension when they design their lesson plans and when coming up with a system for assessment, among many other things. As Paulo Freire writes in his 1982 book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, "Every prescription represents the imposition of one man's choice upon another, transforming the consciousness of the man prescribed to into one that conforms with the prescriber's consciousness" (31). Every decision made by the teacher that disregards the greater picture in society may lead students to believe that language is a rigid monolith, incapable of change, when it is not. When pronouns are taught to students as though there are no other options that could suit their individual purposes, this may be tantamount to the crossing of the boundary into prescriptivism. The danger is that this fails to accommodate for and recognize a student's capacity to know themselves and denies them their ability to express themselves authentically in their second language as they see fit.

In order to avoid the censorship and exclusion of students who are transgender or non-binary, it may be of value to teach students about the inherent fluidity of language. Giving them perspective into the history of the German language and how it has gone through many user-driven changes over time could help to deepen their appreciation of the language as it is spoken today. Knowledge of the way that words evolve over time and that languages are constantly growing and changing may help to alleviate some of the anxiety and pressure to be grammatically precise and encourage them to not be so concerned about making mistakes.

Most importantly, the decision to teach inclusive language despite its novelty demonstrates to students that their voices make an impact on the world. Making them aware that they have as much power over German as those who grew up speaking it would help to shatter the illusion that they will never speak German "as correctly" as a native speaker. Taking control of something like pronouns would teach the valuable lesson that their voices matter more than any rule in language. It would also instill a sense of responsibility in them to know that language is a tool, and that modifying the structures society has created to make life easier when they are unjust is within their power.

Another friction point that defines the linguistic landscape is the tension arising between representation and authenticity. Authenticity is used in language pedagogy to describe material that the students will use to study, but which was not produced by language teachers. Authentic texts can refer to newspapers, films, memes, etc. that were created by native German speakers intended to be consumed by native German speakers. As Islam et al. suggest in their article "The Effectiveness of Using Authentic Texts in the Teaching Reading Comprehension," "[Authentic texts] will help students to connect [t]he language they learned from the authentic text to their context in real life situation" (69). In other words, interpreting authentic texts should be a part of

students' workloads, and always be accompanied by critical examination facilitated by the teacher. However, scouring the internet for such authentic texts which demonstrate grammar points, or include appropriate vocabulary, which also represent marginalized communities can sometimes return a mere handful of materials. Nonetheless, having students critically examine authentic texts which do not lend visibility to marginalized groups of people may still serve the purpose of inclusivity and visibility. Teachers may decide to include activities or discussions which draw students' attention to the way that the text represents or fails to represent minorities, how it illustrates cultural differences or similarities, or in what ways the text could be expanded to reflect a more robust and nuanced picture of society.

Gender-neutral pronouns, which are more commonplace in the United States, are somewhat harder to find in German texts. Despite the push for inclusivity, the German language has remained rather unaccommodating. Those who are more familiar with the German language may attribute this to worries about over-anglicization, but for students who would not know better, it would seem that transgender people remain oddly invisible in one of the most progressive countries in the world. This is not to say that German society has not made some effort to shape the language to be more inclusive, because they have. It is increasingly common that phrases such as, 'ladies and gentlemen' are falling out of fashion in favor of gender non-specific ones, such as, 'very honored guests.' The inclusion of 'male/female/diverse' on job applications also indicates the trend toward gender inclusivity and equality on an interpersonal and social level. While these do not change the grammar of the language, they represent the same type of lexical flexibility for which this paper advocates.

Exacerbating the problem of gender-neutral pronouns, finding a consensus on which pronouns function as analogs between languages is a complicated task. This affects whether or

not the list of pronouns could ever be formalized into the language. Later in this paper, I will present a graph indicating the most popular neopronouns in German, along with their ranking as indicated in an internet poll conducted by the Verein für Geschlechtsneutrales Deutsch e.V. As to the issue of finding a consensus on which pronoun might serve as an equivalent, there are several problems still to consider. For a student to find a pronoun which adequately describes their gender identity, they must first be aware of its existence, and secondly, what its connotations and associations are. Without knowledge of the language, there is no way for a student to know which pronoun would suit them. Beyond that, much like it is in the United States, there are still kinks to work out when it comes to neopronouns and their grammar rules. For example, when using the singular pronoun 'they,' English speakers may cringe at the ungrammaticality of the expression 'they is' and tend to say 'they are' instead, despite referring to a single person.

The role that teachers play in codifying gender neutral pronouns into the languages they teach must be carefully considered. On the one hand, it is important for students who are transgender, nonbinary, or gender non-conforming to have pronouns that feel appropriate and applicable to them in their target language as well as in English, and for those pronouns to be used in the classroom. On the other hand, knowing which pronouns would meet this criterion, where these pronouns could be found in authentic texts for classroom use, if they are used at all, etc., represents a challenge for the already overburdened teacher. The result can be easily misconstrued as impractical or wishful thinking, and at worst be made out as an insidious form of idealistic prescriptivism, academic virtue signaling, brainwashing, or even coercion. To avoid this, many teachers would shy away from the task altogether, ultimately signaling to students their tacit approval of the erasure of trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming identities.

Teachers who wish to overcome this erasure will need to spend some time to consider how to go about representation and inclusion in their classrooms. Acronyms such as LGBT have become quite popular lately because it saves time while also conveying the desire to represent and include marginalized people, but they can sometimes come across as lazy or tokenizing. The Canadian government currently uses "2SLGBTQI+" (standing for: two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and the + is meant to include those who identify with other terminologies) in their federal language (Canada.ca). But using this acronym poses problems of its own.

For one thing, it makes use of the word 'queer,' which, as some may recall, has distinct homophobic associations. As Judith Butler writes, "The term 'queer' has operated as one linguistic practice whose purpose has been the shaming of the subject it names or, rather, the producing of a subject through that shaming interpellation. 'Queer' derives its force precisely through the repeated invocation by which it has become linked to accusation, pathologization, insult" (226). Were it not for the negative connotation and reception, 'queer' would actually seem to function perfectly as an umbrella term for those whose identities do not match with heteronormative social gender constructs.

'Queer' is, to a certain extent, undergoing a process of reclamation, much like the word 'gay' in the past. As is printed in *Long Road to Freedom: The Advocate History of the Gay and Lesbian Movement*, "Journalist Reed Severin investigated historical sources of common epithets for gay men. Criticizing such words as 'gay,' 'f****t,' and 'sissy' as based in 'the heterosexual society's enforcement of sexual conformity'" (43) [my bowdlerization]. These words entail a certain inferiority in the subjects they are meant to describe. While 'gay' is often thought to have been used as a synonym for 'carefree,' or 'happy,' Severin points out that it also historically

refers to “prostitution,” “impetuousness,” and “immorality” (43). Regardless of the origin, ‘gay’ holds no insulting intent (in itself) today and depends entirely on the contexts where it is used as to whether it can be considered hurtful. At the most, it may infer that something is whimsical or unserious in nature, but its use to describe a sexuality eclipses its original connotation almost entirely.

Perhaps the most important thing to say about the reclamation of the word ‘queer’ for the context of this paper can be found in the 2019 article by Juliette Rocheleau on NPR.com: “[Mallory Yu says] I think it’s really important not to use the word ‘queer’ when someone does not identify that way” (Rocheleau). Similarly, ‘homosexual’ and ‘gay’ are sometimes used to describe a range of people, even lesbians, but the term ‘lesbian’ would not be used to describe a gay man. Despite ‘queer’ seeming to have the linguistic capacity to serve as a foil for ‘heterosexual,’ its application still contains traces of violence, which some find degrading or offensive. What the problem at large seems to be is that, when trying to be as inclusive as possible, one either agonizes about which letters to include in their acronyms or oversimplifies when employing a term like ‘queer’ and winds up offending large swaths of people in the process.

Perhaps contributing to this is the fact that, historically, the words used to describe people who did not meet heterosexual standards were intentionally designed to offend or disgust people. As we have seen, ‘gay’ and ‘queer’ have both been used and continue to be used to inferiorize people, despite having undergone processes of reclamation to various degrees. When looking into the history of the word ‘homosexual’ itself, it becomes clear that these terms, while they may be reclaimed, often start out as exclusionary and demonizing. Norman Domeier explains in the book *Gewinner und Verlierer: Beiträge zur Geschichte der Homosexualität in Deutschland*

im 20. Jahrhundert, "In order to discuss the abominable comfortably in public spaces, a word needed to be found that was accessible to everybody. One was found, though not from [German], to embody this meaning: homosexuality" (15) [my translation][2]. This posed its own set of problems in that homosexuals, in bearing that label, seemed to be an alien influence upon the German culture owing to the word's morphology, or the way it was linguistically constructed from a mixture of Latin and Greek.

Susanne zur Nieden supports this notion in her book *Homosexualität und Staatsräson: Männlichkeit, Homophobie und Politik in Deutschland 1900-1945*, arguing that "homosexuals carried a multiculturalist quality by virtue of the nomenclature used to discuss them" (zur Nieden, 22) [my translation][3]. It is important to stress the multicultural quality of the word here since it placed homosexuals in a category of things which were inherently not German. Censorship and erasure of homosexuals could then be seen as a patriotic and noble endeavor, protecting the German people from an invasive and harmful externality. The philosophical quandary thus arises: If a term was devised to be exclusionary, is it essentially exclusionary?

Deleuze and Guattari discuss this philosophical issue in their book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, arguing that language can be seen as a rhizome, that is, a tangled mess of interwoven and grown together system of roots. What that means is that language cannot be understood as having separate, distinct points that bear no relation to the rest of the language, but that language exists as a body where every point is connected to every other point. To quote,

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[2] Zur Salonfähigkeit des Scheußlichen mußte ein Wort gefunden werden, das zunächst nicht jedermann zugänglich war. Es ist gefunden worden, nicht in unserer ehrlichen Muttersprache, ein in seiner sachlichen Bedeutung: Homosexualität.

[3] Kaum jemand konnte mit dem Wort Homosexualität etwas anfangen, das manchen wegen seiner griechisch-lateinischen Sprachwurzel kryptisch und unschön erschien.

"[...]not every trait in a rhizome is necessarily linked to a linguistic feature: semiotic chains of every nature are connected to very diverse modes of coding (biological, political, economic, etc.) that bring into play not only different regimes of signs but also states of differing status" (7). This view would seem to imply that the word homosexual goes far beyond merely the intention to represent an inherent multiculturalism, and beyond Butler's notion that the reiteration of the word in negative interpellations entails its negativity. On this view, 'homosexuality' the term would seem to exist in a metaphysical field of particles, where all of these particles stand for words. The word 'homosexuality' manifests itself in the activation of the particles – and their associations and connections to social constructs – surrounding it, bringing matter to its being. This means that 'homosexuality' has no one singular particular meaning, but rather, it means everything homosexual and everything associated with homosexuality.

In other words, homosexual not only means *insidious multiculturalist Marxism* and *bourgeois decadence* (as was pushed by reactionaries in the interwar period of Germany), but also *Stonewall*, *love*, and *fabulous*. Its use naturally sheds light on all of the things that were associated with it, much like a streetlamp casts a circular glow around itself on a foggy night. This does not excuse the use of phrases like, 'that's gay!' by virtue that all things tie back into homophobia just as much as they do into the happier words, and by the same reasoning, it does not outright condemn the use of the word 'queer.' Despite the negative interpellations from past homophobia, there is every chance for the future use of the words used to describe marginalized communities to push negative associations further outward, so that when a person hears the word, they think next of more 'positive' things.

Teachers should take their cues from the history of the words 'homosexual,' 'gay,' and 'queer' when considering the role of pronouns in the classroom today as well as in the future.

The teacher who denies that language is in flux and refuses to integrate neopronouns into lesson design, syllabi, and classroom policy will be left to play catch up once non-binary pronouns secure a more permanent position in the English and German languages. Being that this movement will not go away, and the linguistic trend will continue to develop to describe what exists, the practices in language instruction require room to develop as well. The refusal to accept this trend will only serve to stunt the usefulness of the German language classroom in the years to come.

Teaching with the tide also prepares students for life beyond the classroom. If they were to ever find themselves in a situation where they needed to use a gender-neutral pronoun, they would be well served by instruction that has raised their awareness of how to implement them correctly. Hearing a gender-neutral pronoun being used in class would help to prepare them if they ever heard one used in the wild, and would also lessen any discomfort that might arise as a result. Furthermore, familiarity with using gender neutral language would likely aid in their understanding were they to encounter a newly constructed way of addressing people, should another solution enter the discourse.

Most importantly, teaching about these issues engages students by demonstrating to them how the German linguistic landscape is being shaped by forces that exist today. Instead of seeing the rules of grammar as existing as a sacred edifice invented by men centuries ago, students have the opportunity to see the language change in real time. Their involvement with the problem combined with their understanding of attitudes in the United States toward transgender and gender non-conforming people will undoubtedly augment their experiences learning German with nuance and perspective. Were there no such challenges to examine the rules of grammar in context, these rules would likely appear to be wholly arbitrary, frustrating, and even nonsensical.

Changes in language come not only in the form of integration of new words and grammars, but also in the changing of words and structures that currently exist. While the former may be seen as a change from the outside (such as borrowing words from other languages like Bourgeoisie or Wanderlust), the latter is a case one could think about as being a change from the inside. Lexical borrowing is an important topic to which students of German will quickly be exposed. Many of the technological words in German are taken directly from English and integrated seamlessly into German. Investigation into this topic can lead students to a deeper appreciation of language as it relates to historical events, such as the mixing of Russian and German languages during the occupation of East Germany by the Soviet Union, as well as the mixing of French, Italian, and German along national borders. Overall, showing students how the linguistic landscape of German once existed, how and why it has changed, and its variations across degrees of latitude might also lend insight into the development of English as well, strengthening students' awareness of linguistic features and commonalities across languages.

Formalization of neopronouns into standard German, if it is not already here, will likely come sooner than many expect. Much to the chagrin of transphobic hobgoblins, 'they' has been used for centuries to maintain ambiguity in the singular third person. As Jodi Heckel points out, "Authors including Shakespeare often have used the singular 'they.'[...] There's a place in 'The Pickwick Papers' where Dickens uses it to conceal gender for a page or so[...] You see it all over as a literary device" (Heckel). While there are many cases where 'they' refers to a singular person, it does not mean, of course, that the word has historically been used by trans people to identify themselves. However, it does present an exciting opportunity for the trans community, as there is already a feature in language to accommodate for somebody who wishes to be referred to without gendered pronouns.

Teaching Neopronouns & Gender Inclusive Language

It is important to think about the ways in which students' gender identities are represented or not in the target language and to accommodate accordingly. Biondi suggests, "Another way to help LGBTQ+ students feel represented in the curriculum, as well as educating all students of LGBTQ+ sensitivity, is to teach inclusive adjective endings and gender-neutral pronouns in our target languages" (38), citing the positive reception in classrooms of "'x', 'e', and '@', … Latinx, as well as the gender-neutral pronoun options, such as elle … and elles" (38), in a 2019 study by Parodi-Brown[4]. This presents interesting implications for different language classrooms. The German classroom is the primary focus of this paper, but for the Chinese or ASL classroom for example, the desire to (re)incorporate gendered pronouns into a language that has no gendered pronouns warrants further consideration.

Teaching students about the situation regarding pronouns in the world as part of a justification for learning neopronouns is important for representations' sake, but also for another reason. Learning about the issue and its current status empowers every member in the classroom to think critically and enables them to act according to their beliefs with the best possible information available. As Angineh Djavadghazaryans points out in her article ""Please don't gender me!" Strategies for Inclusive Language Instruction in a Gender-Diverse Campus Community," "We have to acknowledge that gender-neutral language has been introduced into the German language and that this social development is just as much part of the German culture as any other sociocultural topic that we teach" (282). This acknowledgement not only

[4] Parodi-Brown, J. (2019, February 7-9). Authentic voices: Creating LGBTQ +-affirming classes through language and content. [Conference session]. Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. New York, New York. https://www.nectfl.org/ conference_2019_archived/

strengthens the teacher-student trust, but it also serves as an open invitation for students to engage with the material on a deeper level. Instead of merely accepting that the language ‘is the way it is,’ it provokes thought into the subtleties of grammatical features and the grounds for their existence. This enables not only reflection on another culture, but reflection on their own culture and perspective as well.

Introducing gendered pronouns and neopronouns early on may also help to facilitate student understanding of the concept of grammatical gender when it appears later on. This can be as simple as including the singular third person ‘they’ in the list of German pronouns when introducing pronouns. Another possibility, to illustrate the significance of the third person as distinct from first or second person pronouns, all of the third person singular pronouns could be grouped together under the neopronoun x, such as is used in algebra to denote the unknown quantity. Students can practice using neopronouns discussing a puppet, or something similar, a technique sometimes used to practice the formal case as well.

One of the benefits of instructing students with ‘they’ is that it exists in both languages. Not only will students gain experience and confidence integrating this word into their linguistic tool belt in a foreign language, but they will also be more aware of the pronoun in English. Teaching students to use ‘they’ can also help to illustrate the concept of subject-verb agreement, being that its use to refer to a single person results in a grammatical anomaly in English which does not transfer into German, e.g., ‘they are’ (English plural) vs. ‘they ist’ (German singular). Another chance to deepen cross-cultural awareness for students would come when engaging with the neopronoun *dey*, and showing students its similarity to the English neopronoun *they*. Furthermore, asking students to think critically about why pronouns are gendered at all when

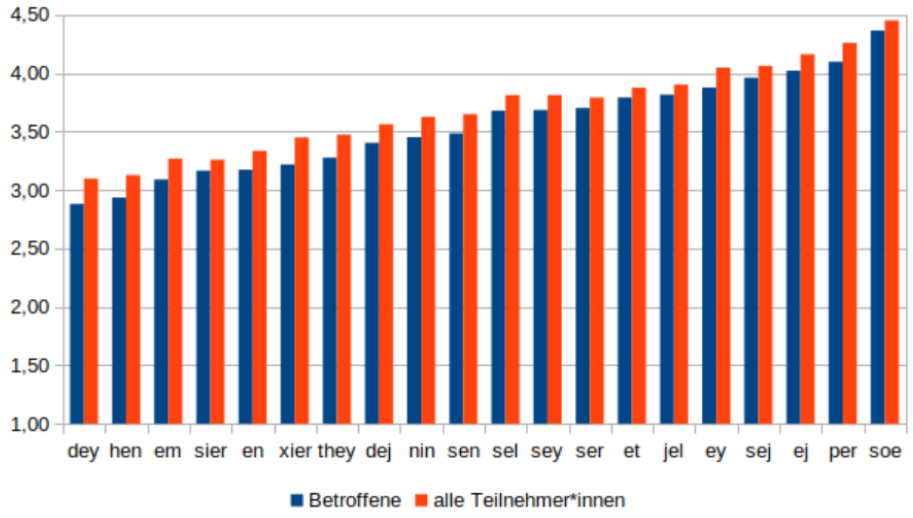
pronouns such as I, you, and we are genderless may help to remind students of the familiarity they enjoy already with non-gendered pronouns.

What the previous sections indicate is that teachers of German should opt for inclusive and representative language wherever possible. Gender neutral language presents a problem in German because almost every job carries gender, much like the waiter/waitress distinction in English. While there has been a conscious movement to address this issue, there is no single approach that is the most effective or most common. The following list of suggestions is by no means meant to constitute a rubric for instructors, to suggest that there are no other options available, nor to indicate that new options may arise in the future. They are suggestions which have emerged over the course of my engagement with this discourse and are meant to be seen as recommendations for the German classroom. While my knowledge is somewhat restricted to German, there are likely analogs to be found in other languages, especially considering that the discourse on this topic will continue to grow.

There is no consensus on how to teach neopronouns in German, but there are a variety of interesting suggestions. In the context of nouns from a speaker's heritage language, Biondi recommends, "permitting the use of the native language when there is no cultural equivalent in the target language" (36). Whether or not Biondi would consider this as applicable for a person's neopronouns is unclear, though it would seem to follow the same line of reasoning, as she later states, "Representing and validating students' backgrounds and identities in the curriculum gives them the message that the course material is accessible to them, to people that look like them, and to people with their linguistic, ethnic, religious, and socio-economic background" (39). To allow students to embed their neopronoun into their foreign language may seem to be inappropriate at first glance. However, it prevents having a student relive the inconvenience of

explaining themselves in terms that may be too narrow or too focused on aspects that they find irrelevant or disturbing. For a student who has already made the journey through a list of unsuitable pronouns, being made to do the process again, and this time finding themselves unable to understand the nuances and rules of the target language, would be frustrating at the very least.

A study by the Verein für Geschlechtsneutrales Deutsch e.V. asked gender non-binary German speakers to indicate, from a list of 20 neopronouns, which ones they preferred. They were also asked to identify their own pronouns (indicated by the value 'Betroffene'), and how they felt about other pronouns (represented in the value 'alle Teilnehmer*innen'). Their results are indicated in the graph below, where a lower score indicates the more preferred of the pronouns.



Although the pronoun en sits in fourth place in this study, the Verein für Geschlechtsneutrales Deutsch e.V. advocates its use over others. This pronoun declines similarly to the masculine and neuter cases, and so it presents teachers with a helpful example to

demonstrate the patterns of pronoun declension to students[5]. As stated on their website, "the runner up to en in our collective decision making process was the Swedish pronoun hen […] One of [its] advantages is that it sounds different enough from the masculine forms […] that it is hard to mistake […] [Its disadvantage was] the negative associations some had due to its similarities with the English word hen" (geschlechtsneutral.net) [my translation][6]. Following hen, come dey and they, and sier and xier. The merit to a neopronoun like dey or they is that they afford students with a sort of familiarity as they learn to navigate the case system in that it resembles 'they.' Understanding that 'they' changing to 'them' and 'he' changing to 'him' is related to that word's function as a subject or an object in the context of another language could facilitate the acquisition of the German pronouns and their changes due to the case system. At this point, whether the declensions of en, hen, dey, sier, or xier helps to illustrate and further facilitate this process or not still requires research. Despite this fact, their being mentioned in the class as neopronouns raises awareness of their existence, and thus increases the visibility of a group which continues to suffer under systems of erasure.

Drawing students' attention to the ways in which German culture represents LGBTQ+ people promotes not only a welcoming, inclusive atmosphere and visibility for historically underrepresented people, but it also presents the opportunity for students to explore unique facets of a different culture. When discussing holidays, a teacher could ask students if they have heard

[5] See example declension table in Appendix A

[6] Das Pronomen *hen* wurde aus dem Schwedischen übernommen [...] Ein Vorteil von *hen/hens/hem/hen* gegenüber *en/ens/em/en* ist, dass es im Dativ und Akkusativ nicht so leicht zu einer klanglichen Verwechslung mit den maskulinen Formen *ihm* und *ihn* kommen kann. Nachteile sind, dass sich *hen* nicht so gut wie *en* über die Ähnlichkeit zu existierenden Pronomen motivieren lässt (siehe Erläuterung zu *en* oben) und dass manche Personen bei *hen* negative Assoziationen mit dem englischen Wort für *Henne* haben.

of CSD, or Christopher Street Day, which is the European Pride celebration named for the address of the Stonewall Inn. In a unit where students learn about job listings in Germany, their attention to the omnipresent m/w/d (männlich/weiblich/divers) could be used as a springboard to discuss the lack of linguistically gender-neutral job names. One could easily implement, in a variety of contexts, the phrase coined at Kansas State University by Necia Chronister, "Meine Damen, Herren und Nicht-Binären" (Chronister) which she came up with after hearing a seventh grader address an audience by saying, "Ladies, gents, and non-binary friends."

Practices that assume heteronormativity, or which make assumptions about student identities, are not as effective at getting students to think creatively about their own identities as practices that allow students the freedom to discuss their identities as something which they define for themselves. As Cahnmann-Taylor et al. write in their article "Queer is as Queer Does: Queer L2 Pedagogy in Teacher Education," "From romantic relationships and family roles to lexical changes and the ways in which grammar is structured, queering the language classroom goes far beyond anything having to do with sex per se toward understandings that cast all identities (e.g. linguistic, cultural, sexual, racial, (dis)able, etc.) as fluid, emergent, and subject to discursive maintenance or change" (132-133). Allowing students creative freedom in their work gives them the opportunity to develop their worldview and their self-perception. Pretending that students' identities are locked or ineffable teaches them that they have no agency in the way that they think about themselves and how they want the world to see them. Providing students with the opportunity to be creative when discussing matters related to their identity and the identities of others enables their growth and development as autonomous, self-aware, and self-monitoring individuals.

Another way to facilitate welcoming and friendly classrooms in the language teachers use resembles the his/her or (s)he formulations in English. It is a male teacher, der Lehrer, a female teacher, die Lehrerin, and mixed plural teachers: either Lehrer:innen (to use the BinnenI), Lehrer_innen (to use the Gendergap), Lehrer*innen (to use the Genderstern), or Lehrer/-innen (to use the Querstrich). This solution is mostly orthographic, although it may be expressed vocally by the addition of a glottal stop in the position of the colon, underscore, asterisk, or forward slash. A drawback of this option is that the speaker has to elicit both of the articles that accompany the noun, along with variations in affixation to any adjectives preceding the noun, which makes its implementation clumsy, especially when spoken. The argument for why a mixed gender noun should be employed as opposed to listing the original nouns falls apart in the example: Sie schreiben einen Brief an den/die guten/gute Autor:in. vs. Sie schreiben einen Brief an den guten Autor oder die gute Autorin. (You (formal) write a letter to the good author.) Regardless of its clumsiness, this method is quite common in print media in public spaces because it allows for wider audiences to be addressed with brevity.

Avoid the use of gendered nouns and opt for more indirect formulations. Instead of asking students to seek out a Partner*in, ask students instead to work zu zweit or zu dritt (in pairs or in threes). Instead of discussing a favorite Autor*in, discuss a favorite Person, die beruflich Bücher schreibt (a person who writes books for a living). Similarly, the use of formal titles such as Herr and Frau can be replaced in situations with *Enby*, (short for Non-Binary) or with expressions such as *sehr geehrte Person*, or *verehrtes Publikum*, such as was suggested by the Verein for Geschlectsneutrales Deutsch. This option saves face with those who are resistant to change, though it may serve to exculpate students who are too lazy to learn new vocabulary. To contrast this, formulations like the passive voice may be used for more advanced students.

Instead of Die Studierenden schreiben einen Brief, one could say ein Brief wird geschrieben. (Those at study write a letter vs. a letter is written.) The drawback there is that beginning students will likely be confused when confronted with this formulation, and they almost certainly will not be able to produce it themselves.

The Verein für Geschlechtsneutrales Deutsch e.V., recommends "the formulation of a gender neutral substantive with the addition of an -e, and the use of the definite article de[…] and for plurals, the addition of -rne with the definite article die" (geschlechtsneutral.net) [my translation][7]. For example, de Autorne, de Kellerne, and die Richterne, die Schriftstellerne. These nouns are neither feminine nor masculine, nor are they neuter. The association calls this case the Inklusivum. A potential drawback to this style is that it is young and finds its roots in internet forums and discussion boards. Stubborn prescriptivists may favor the options above more than this style, though there would seem to be merit owing to its semi-democratic inception. Contrasting the simplification of the articles der and die into a singular de, the declension of adjectives deviates from the rules of standard German. For instance, the strong declension of an adjective in the nominative and accusative cases is -ey. For example, Liebey Professore, … (Dear professor, …). For a case system that is hard enough for English speakers to learn as it has existed for hundreds of years, the editing of that system may prove to discourage non-native speakers even more.

[7] Wir empfehlen, geschlechtsneutrale Substantive durch die Endung ***-e*** zu bilden und dazu den bestimmten Artikel ***de*** zu verwenden...

Conclusion

Normalization of gender non-specific language is good for many reasons. Not only does it encourage people to stop categorizing people according to their body parts, it serves to extend the same courtesy to transgender and gender non-conforming people as we do to everybody else. Every self-correction is a step toward a world that is a little bit safer and friendlier to LGBTQ+ people. Obviously, that journey is much longer and more involved than making changes to the language we use, but, as has been demonstrated here, language is a powerful instrument.

Educating students about gender non-specific language empowers them to change aspects of their lives which still bear the stain of imperialist violence. Bringing their attention to the ways that language perpetuates this design and then giving them the green light to come up with solutions will prepare them for a future fixing the mistakes of previous generations. Teaching them the ways that they can play an active role in how language is shaped removes some of the mysticism involved in learning a foreign language. When they see that they hold power in shaping the future of language, the mysteries of grammar will begin to feel like they belong to them, instead of being forced onto them by ghosts of the past.

The instruction of neopronouns in foreign language classrooms is warranted despite the many challenges it poses. Most importantly, it draws attention to the fact that language itself has been shaped by a desire to group people into one of two categories but demonstrates that language is flexible and can be made to serve the speaker. Teaching neopronouns demonstrates to students that their teachers are invested in the effort to overturn the subversive systems that harm people, that they value inclusivity, and that they understand the social and pedagogical necessity to create and defend safe spaces for their students.

Utilizing neopronouns in assignments and classroom materials enables students to discuss and engage with issues surrounding their identity, as well as the identities of historically marginalized and censured people, teaching the importance of visibility while fostering the development of empathy. Since grammatical gender is already an aspect of German, there is great benefit to developing an atmosphere of honesty and open mindedness surrounding that issue, not only in how it is instructed, but facilitating critical thinking and engagement with the topic in a way that does not challenge an individual's identity or their sense of belonging in the classroom.

Furthermore, discussions of gender identity intersect with many interesting avenues of cultural awareness. Not only are students afforded the chance to learn about the history of the LGBTQ+ movement in Germany, but they may also learn about the cultural differences between the U.S. and other places in the world. As well as this, students will develop their linguistic techniques of circumnavigation, as well as flexibility in their ability to understand inclusive language structures in German. Students who engage creatively with neopronouns will be more prepared, more flexible, and more empathetic. Whether or not these students choose to advocate for the use of neopronouns or not, their teachers will have done the best job they could in informing them and preparing them for the changes to the German language which are sure to come.

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Appendix A - Gender Neutrality in German One-Sheet

- Permit Borrowing/Embedding of Pronouns from L1 into L2
- Include Neopronouns in Instruction & Activities (Declension Table for *en* below)
- Stress Cultural Overlays and Observe LGBTQ+ Holidays
- Give Students Autonomy on Assignments and Encourage Critical Thinking
- Use Gender Neutral Language:
    - Opt for Non-Gendered Job Titles
    - Use the BinnenI, Gendergap, Genderstern or Querstrich
    - Demonstrate the Use of Enby instead of Mister or Missus
    - Use/Demonstrate Inklusivum
    - Substantiate Verbs

	Inklusivum	Femininum	Maskulinum	Neutrum
Nominativ	***en***	***sie***	***er***	***es***
Possessivform	***ens***	***ihr***	***sein***	***sein***
Dativ	***em***	***ihr***	***ihm***	***ihm***
Akkusativ	***en***	***sie***	***ihn***	***es***

Source: Der Verein für Geschlechtsneutrales Deutsch e.V.

For further information, please visit:

https://geschlechtsneutral.net/

https://www.bk.admin.ch/bk/de/home/dokumentation/sprachen/hilfsmittel-textredaktion/leitfaden-zum-geschlechtergerechten-formulieren.html

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