
Neutralising personal nouns as an undoing-gender strategy: Metalinguistic awareness and patterns of use

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Hirschauer (1994: 678) characterises *undoing gender* as “a constructive performance” and “a practiced disregard” (my translations) of, equally practiced, gender actualisations. This definition thus implies the performance of conscious avoidance strategies. On a linguistic level, undoing gender entails strategies to avoid forms otherwise differentiated according to a binary perception of sex/gender. A particularly revealing case is that of epicene nouns: nouns whose original semantics are [-human] but that are used to refer to human beings. They thereby evade gender marking, which is a feature of [+human] nouns. An example is the German and Dutch morphological pattern in *-kraft* and *-kracht* (e.g., *Lehrkraft* / *leerkracht* ‘teacher’) that serves as an alternative to binarily constructed pairs such as *Lehrer–Lehrerin* / *leraar–lerares* ‘teacher.MASC–teacher.FEM’. This example is interesting because it did not originate as an undoing-gender strategy, but rather the forms have come to be recommended in (institutional) guidelines for gender-fair language use and are reflected upon as avoidance strategies: as “Ersatzformen”, “um umständliche Doppelformen zu vermeiden” (Diewald & Steinhauer 2022: 135).

This study investigates the neutralising morphological pattern *-kraft* resp. *-kracht* through a corpus-linguistic lens, drawing on internet data from the deTenTen23 corpus (SketchEngine). It connects the actual distribution of the pattern in language use with its treatment in metalinguistic discourse as linguistic avoidance strategies. The analysis shows that neutralising strategies are significantly associated with non-referential contexts, i.e., contexts that lack a specific, contextually identifiable referent (cf. also Klein 2022). This demonstrates that the investigated linguistic neutralisation strategy develops its avoidance potential mainly in referential contexts, in which differentiated forms of linguistic *doing gender* are the default.

References: • Diewald, G. & A. Steinhauer (2022). *Handbuch geschlechtergerechte Sprache. Wie Sie angemessen und verständlich gendern*. 2., aktualisierte und erweiterte Auflage. Berlin: Dudenverlag. • Hirschauer, S. (1994). Die soziale Fortpflanzung der Zweigeschlechtlichkeit. *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 46(4), 668–692. • Klein, A. (2022). Wohin mit Epikoina? Überlegungen zur Grammatik und Pragmatik geschlechtsindefiniter Personenbezeichnungen. In G. Diewald & D. Nübling (eds.), *Genus – Sexus – Gender*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 135–189.