
Avoiding *jemand*?

A study on alternative structures for German indefinites

Sophie Ellsäßer
Universität Osnabrück
sophie.ellsaesser@uni-osnabrueck.de

The effort to use gender-inclusive language in German leads to uncertainties regarding grammatical and social gender marking. Indefinite pronouns such as *jemand* ‘someone’ or *jeder* ‘everyone’, which prototypically show unspecific reference (1), could be described as non-gender-specific as they can be used for persons of any gender.

- (1) *Ist da jemand, der mir helfen kann?*
‘Is there anyone who_F can help me?’
- (2) *Jemand, der/die – ergibt es Sinn, so zu gendersn?*
‘Someone who_M/who_F – does it make sense to use genders like this?’

(<https://www.gutefrage.net/frage/jemand-derdie--ergibt-es-sinn-so-zu-gendersn>)

However, metalinguistic discussion (2) reveals a need for gender-inclusive alternatives. Indefinite pronouns like *jemand* usually exhibit masculine agreement (e.g., *der* in (1)) and are often considered masculine within defective paradigms lacking feminine forms (e.g., Zifonun 2017). Copot & Sims (2025) have shown that linguistic norms and metalinguistic awareness can increase the perception of this defectiveness. Currently, no conventionalized strategy has been established for indefinite pronouns in German, resulting in a certain amount of variation in avoidance strategies.

In my talk, I will examine which avoidance strategies can be used for the indefinite pronoun *jemand*. Strategies identified in previous studies and metalinguistic discourse are empirically examined using a corpus of informal written language (the Reddit-d corpus). Subsequently, these strategies are analysed through a survey study. In particular, I will consider those types of alternative strategies mentioned in Nikolaev & Bermel (2022) for defective paradigms – novel word forms, synonymous word forms, and periphrastic word forms. This study will investigate the frequency and conditions of occurrence for these strategies. Furthermore, I will discuss which strategy shows the greatest potential for conventionalization and how this might shape our perception of indefinite pronouns in German.

References: • Copot, M. & A. D. Sims (2025). The influence of prescriptivism on French verbal defectiveness. *Linguistics* 63(5), 1293–1338. • Nikolaev, A. & N. Bermel (2022). Explaining uncertainty and defectivity of inflectional paradigms. *Cognitive Linguistics* 33(3), 585–621. • Zifonun, G. (2017). B1.5 Pronomina. In B. Wiese, A. Murelli, G. Zifonun, S. Schlotthauer & L. Gunkel (eds.), *Grammatik des Deutschen im europäischen Vergleich*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 519–799.