Effective Strategies for

Promoting Gender-Fair Language

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Abstract

Gender-fair language, that is, referring to men and women with symmetrical linguistic forms, has been found to influence hearers’ or readers’ cognitive representations and behavior and thus contributes to gender equality. Today, gender-fair language is officially promoted, however often still rejected in practice. It is largely unknown which factors help to make gender-fair forms more common in everyday life. The present research investigates two strategies for promoting gender-fair language in German: (1) persuasion by arguments as a persistent attitude-based strategy (Experimental Part I) and (2) triggering the use of gender-fair forms as a simple behavior-based strategy (Experimental Part II).

Experimental Part I is based on the elaboration likelihood model. Arguments for gender-fair language and masculine generics were collected and pretested for persuasiveness (Pretest 1). In Pretests 2 to 5, highly (strong) and less persuasive (weak) messages were created to promote gender-fair language or masculine generics. Study 1 examined whether people adjusted their attitudes, language use, and cognitive responses more to the promoted point of view after a strong message versus a weak message and after a weak message versus two control conditions. Results revealed that people used gender-fair forms more frequently after arguments promoting gender-fair language compared to control conditions. Arguments promoting masculine generics had no influence; attitudes and cognitive responses were not affected. Study 2 advanced the design of Study 1 by improving messages and measurements and by manipulating personal relevance as a trigger for elaborated processing. Results revealed that attitudes, language use, and the valence of cognitive
responses were more influenced by a strong message than by a weak message. Personal relevance showed no influence.

Experimental Part II focused on triggering gender-fair language behavior. It was hypothesized that people would use more gender-fair forms after reading a text containing gender-fair forms than after a text containing masculine generics and two control conditions. Study 3 confirmed the assumed pattern for women, but not for men. In Study 4, an additional condition made people explicitly aware of the presented gender-fair forms. Women were expected to use more gender-fair language after any exposure to gender-fair forms, while men were expected to use it more frequently only in the awareness condition. The data confirmed this pattern.

Concluding, the use of gender-fair language can be increased by arguments promoting gender-fair language as well as by just reading gender-fair forms. However, it is important that men are made aware of the read forms. Attitudes toward gender-fair language can be influenced by arguments promoting gender-fair language. Future research should extend the present measurements, deepen the theoretical embedding, and investigate individual factors. The results are of special interest for trainings for which units on practice, recognition, and arguments are recommended. Overall, two efficient strategies for promoting gender-fair language were identified. This is a new and important finding in the context of implementing gender equality in language.