

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 upshot of politically correct gendering. The new gendering suffix is a variant of an existing vowel-initial gender suffix, but with a glottal stop as syllable onset.

Phonologically, this development raises the following question. Is the glottal stop in the new gendering suffix a segmental part of the new suffix or is its presence a secondary effect that is triggered because the new suffix is promoted to the status of a phonological word. Vowel-initial p-words are phonetically introduced by a glottal stop in German. The evidence converges on the glottal stop being part of the base form of the suffix and therefore phonemic.

1. Before the change

As for the (non-)phonemic status of the glottal stop in German, the predominant¹ school of thought is this. „*There is agreement that this sound should not be treated as a phoneme*“, as Wiese (1996:16) puts it, and in the words of Féry (2014:127), “*Der Glottalverschluss ist im Deutschen nicht phonemisch.*“² The main reason, according to Wiese (1996: 58) is the fact that the distribution of the glottal stop is contextually conditioned and optional. Hence, this speech sound has no distinctive function in German.

Nonetheless, the glottal stop is a very frequent speech sound in German since phonetically, it optionally introduces the syllable-initial vowel of any stressed syllable. The particular pronunciation of the suddenly ubiquitous, new gendering suffix “*in” has changed the situation qualitatively.

Ever since gendering has become an issue of public profiling in Western civilization, German has participated in this movement of symbolic actions.³ As for grammatical gender, German provides a well-equipped grammatical tool kit, namely three genders, expressed on articles, nouns, pronouns, and attributive adjectives and, in addition, suffixes signifying differences in sex, such as “-in”, designating females (1):⁴

- | | | | |
|--------|---------------|---|-------------------------------|
| (1) a. | Linguist | – | Linguist _{in} |
| | linguist | | linguist _{fem.} |
| | b. Linguisten | – | Linguist _{innen} |
| | linguists | | linguist _{+fem.+pl.} |

A simple thing became complicated when when activists realized that homo sapiens is not binarily assorted, that is, not neatly partitioned into male and female specimens. At least psychosocially, there exist conceptions of hybrid, fluid, or converse gender identities. The sexual

¹ As Renate Raffelsiefen generously let me know, there are dissenting votes, such as Mangold (1990: 37), Maas (2004: 224), or Eisenberg (2006: 117).

² Translation: „The glottal stop is not phonemic in German.“

³ Let’s remember Karl Marx’s insight that merely interpreting the world differently does not change it. Gendering does not narrow the gender pay gap and it does not lessen any single-mother’s hardship. It is a symbolic action distracting from implementing effective changes, and a feel-well exercise by and for non-disadvantaged. Maybe this explains why presently, mandatory gendering is repudiated by a majority of language users (s. fn. 26).

⁴ Foreign suffixes indicating the category female have been imported together with foreign words: *Bachelorette*, *Friseuse*, *Heroine*, *Magistra*, *Stewardess*.

categorization of such persons lacks an adequate linguistic signification. Repair attempts readily introduced the “gender star”⁵ exemplified in (2), as an, albeit imperfect, solution.

- (2) Linguist*innen
 linguist*_{FEM+PLURAL}
 ‚linguists‘ (collective, of any sexual identity whatever)

The asterisk preceding the suffix is to signify binary as well as non-binary or genderqueer identities. The usage of an asterisk in this particular function started in Britain, where it is known since the 90ies, and made its way into German. In the meantime, the Oxford English Dictionary has registered it, as Steinmetz (2018) comments: “*trans**: originally used to include explicitly both transsexual and transgender, or (now usually) to indicate the inclusion of gender identities such as gender-fluid, agender, etc., alongside transsexual and transgender.”

The immediate but obvious drawback of the ingenious way out of a putative dilemma of binarity is this. The asterisk grapheme does not correspond to a speech sound and therefore is unpronounceable. Moreover, it can only be used in written language, thereby evidently discriminating against another sizeable group of already discriminated persons, namely functional illiterate. This is the moment when the glottal stop timely entered the scene. News anchor personnel has started to interpret the asterisk as a signal of phonetic disintegration of the suffix. Consequently, the suffix “*in” gets pronounced as an unintegrated vowel-initial linguistic morpheme, which needs or warrants to be initiated in the phonetically standard way of German, namely by a glottal stop.

2. After the change

Since a year or two, the plural of suffixed nouns denoting females (3a), such as female feminists for example, and the politically correctly *gendered* plural “feminists” (3b) are phonetically differentiated by means of the glottal stop.⁶

- (3) a. Feministinnen – [feministnən]
 female feminists
 b. Feminist*innen – [feministʔnən]
 feminists (female, male, diverse, etc.)

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, 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). The suffix is productive and thereby, the set of minimal pairs correspondingly increases. Presently, the phonemic glottal stop in German is distributionally restricted, namely confined to the gendering suffix ‘-in’. It is difficult to predict whether such an intervention will be short-lived or not.⁷ In any case, the glottal stop has not (yet) been generalized to

⁵ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_star

⁶ In German, it is named “*Gender-Pause*” (gender pause); see <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender-Pause>. For sound samples you may consult the web, e.g.: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8aooftBP2Bg> (Sept. 25, 2021).

⁷ In 2019, the “Verein Deutsche Sprache” (= Association for German language) posted a petition signed by prominent figures of all stripes for stopping the “monkey-business of mandatory gendering”. <https://vds-ev.de/genwartsdeutsch/gendersprache/gendersprache-unterschriften/schluss-mit-dem-gender-unfug/>

other, gendering suffixes of foreign origin such as ‘-esse’ or ‘-ette’, as in (4a,b), with the exception of some forerunners.⁸

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| (4) a. Steward*essen | b. Baron*essen |
| stewards (male, female, or divers) | barons (male, female, or divers) |
| c. Pro*etten | d. Bachelor*etten |
| professionals (male, female, or divers) | bachelors (male, female, or diverse) |

The extension of the starring convention of „-*in“ to „-*ette“, „-*ess(e)“ und „-*euse“ is likely to be hampered⁹ by the fact, that some of these forms are felt to be discriminatory, as for instance „-euse“: „*Masseurin*“ (masseuse) is neutral while „*Masseuse*“ (masseuse) is connotatively marked. According to Duden, the former prescriptive grammar of German, the same is true for “*Friseurin*” (hairdresser_{fem.}) vs. “*Friseuse*” (hairdresser_{fem.}), which is characterized as „*umgangssprachlich abwertend*“ (= colloquially depreciative).¹⁰

3. Alternative accounts?

The conjecture of the out-of-the-blue phonemicity of the glottal stop ventured in this squib needs to be theoretically contextualized. Caroline Féry succinctly formulated her judgement as follows:¹¹ What apparently has changed is the fact that phonologically, the suffix “-in” has acquired the status of a prosodic word.¹² Völkening (2022) supplies detailed argumentation for the p-word thesis. According to the p-word analysis of the suffix pronounced with a glottal stop (5a), the word structure (5a) differs from (5b). In (5a), the suffix /*in/ is a p-word, while in (5b), the suffix /in/ does not qualify as p-word.

- | |
|---|
| (5) a. [Koordinator*in] _ω en] _ω |
| [coordinators _[male/female/divers] -pl.] |
| b. [Koordinatorinnen] _ω |
| [coordinators _{fem.-pl.}] |

In the p-word analysis of /*in/, the phonological difference between (5a) and (5b) reduces to a difference in the prosodic structure. In one case, viz. (5b), the suffix /in/ is prosodically integrated into the stem, in the other case, viz. (5a), it is a p-word. In this case, the occurrence of the glottal stop is predictable. It follows from the rule that a vowel-initial p-word is augmented by a glottal stop, as in (6a) in contrast to (6b).¹³ If the gendering „*in“ is structurally represented as a p-word, it will be subject to this rule.

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| (6) a. Spiegelei – [ˈʃpiːgəl ʔaɪ] | [= Spiegel _N + Ei _N] |
| mirror-egg (‘fried egg’) | mirror + egg |
| b. Spiegelei – [ʃpiːgəl ˈaɪ] | [= Spiegel + -ei _{suffix}] |
| mirror+ <i>suffix</i> (‘mirroring’) | mirror + <i>suffix</i> |

⁸ Here is a first find: “*Bachelor*ette of Arts*” (<https://soundcloud.com/sender-der-kuenste/bachelorette-of-arts-ep1>)

⁹ This is what Richard Wiese suggests in a personal communication (by mail, April 2022).

¹⁰ <https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/Friseuse> [9. 4. 2022]

¹¹ Personal communication by mail (Sept. 2021): “*Was sich anscheinend geändert hat, ist, dass /-in/ den Status eines prosodischen Worts erreicht hat*“ (‘What has apparently changed is the status of /-in/, which has become a prosodic word.’)

¹² A phonological word (= p-word) is a constituent of a phonological phrase: [P ... [ω [φ [σ ...]]]].
P = phonological phrase; ω = p-word; φ = foot; σ = syllable.

¹³ According to Wiese (1996: 59), in German, a glottal stop is inserted as syllable onset whenever the prosodic foot of a p-word would consist of a syllable without onset.

Given this set of facts, the issue that needs to be decided is this. Is the glottal stop the automatic consequence of a prior *change of the prosodic status* of the suffix or is the change of the prosodic status a result of *the prior change of the base form* of the suffix? This is a question of cause and effect. In one case, the change of the prosodic status would be the cause, in the other case it would be the effect. In other words, the crucial question is this: Is the glottal stop a segment of the base form of a new suffix, derived from the existing suffix /-in/, as in (7a), or is the glottal stop the result of an allomorphic, rule-governed insertion, as in (7b).

- (7) a. [ʔɪn]_ω
 b. [ɪn]_ω → [ʔ]-insertion [ʔɪn]

If (7a) is the correct analysis, the glottal stop is a segment of the base form of the suffix¹⁴ and therefore, the p-word status is the result of the phonological structure. Consonant-initial suffixes are prosodically not integrated into the stem (Raffelsiefen 2000: 53). If, on the other hand, (7b) is the correct analysis, the glottal stop is inserted by the phonological rule that modifies the syllable onset of a p-word (see fn. 13). In (7a), the glottal stop is phonemic while in (7b), it is allophonic.

Let us start with the etiology of the actual situation. At the beginning there was the suffix /in/ for explicitly referring to females (8a), and there was the generic use of nouns.¹⁵ In (8b), the masculine noun “Chef” (boss) is used generically, that is, for referring to any person of any gender who is a boss. Pushed by affirmative actions, the generic usage is gradually replaced by the combination of a given noun and the suffix /in/, separated by a slash, a colon, or with the suffix in brackets or with capitalizing the letter “I” of the suffix (8c). The use of an asterisk (“gender star”) was the next step (8d), and it came along with a change in the semantics of the suffix. The suffix /in/ is the conventional way of deriving nouns denoting females, while the new variant, viz. the starred suffix /*in/, is the innovation for denoting the entire set of referents with any kind of sexual identity. So, /in/ and /*in/ have ended up as two semantically different morphemes.

- (8) a. Chef_{in}
 boss_{fem.}
 b. Frauen sind die besseren Chefs.¹⁶
 women are the better bosses_{m.}
 c. Chef/in; Chef:in; Chef(in), ChefIn
 boss/fem.
 ‘male or female or diverse boss’
 d. Chef*in¹⁷

What was still missing was the *phonetic* differentiation of the two suffixes. This is the point when the glottal stop entered the scene as the phonetic signal of the non-integration of the suffix /*in/ in contrast to the integrated suffix /in/ for females. Since vowel-initial suffixes are always integrated in German, a non-integrated /*in/ would violate the grammar of German, unless the

¹⁴ According to Zifonun (2018: 52), the suggestion that the glottal stop is part of the base form goes back to Anatol Stefanowitsch, who has suggested this in his language-blog.

¹⁵ „eine männliche Katze“ (a_{fem.} male_{fem.} cat_{fem.}) or “ein weiblicher Täter” (a_{m.} female_{m.} perpetrator_{m.}).

¹⁶ <https://www.zeit.de/zeit-magazin/2022/17/harald-martenstein-fuehrungskraft-chef-persoenlichkeitstypen>

¹⁷ <https://www.scribbr.de/richtig-gendern/gendersternchen/>

glottal stop is regarded as part of the suffix. In this case, the suffix counts as consonant-initial. Consonant-initial suffixes are generally not integrated (Raffelsiefen 2000: 51) and are potential p-words, as Raffelsiefen (2000: 53) emphasized: “*only consonant-initial suffixes form separate p-words*”. Integration and non-integration show in syllabification. Integrated suffixes are re-syllabified, as in (9a), with points marking the syllable boundaries. The non-integrated suffix in (9b) is not re-syllabified since „*consonant-initial suffixes are not syllabified together with their stem whereas vowel-initial suffixes always are* (Raffelsiefen (2000: 51).

- (9) a. Spie.ler – Spie.le.rin – Spie.le.rin.nen
 player – player_f – players_{m./f./diverse}
 b. Spie.ler.*in – Spie.ler.*in.nen
 player_{m./f./diverse} – players_{m./f./diverse-pl}.

If this is the correct description, the glottal stop has become phonemic. First of all, its distribution is not optional anymore but distinctive. It is the distinctive element for distinguishing two productive suffixes, namely the new suffix */*in/*, denoting persons of any gender, and the ‘old’ suffix */in/* for deriving nouns that explicitly refer to females. The new variant of the suffix */in/*, namely */*in/*, in its base form, is introduced by the glottal stop, that is, by a consonant. Therefore it behaves prosodically like most other morphemes with a consonant-initial syllable structure, namely as a p-word.

Now, let us briefly examine the alternative analysis, that is, the spontaneous upgrading of */*in/* to the status of a p-word. In this case, the glottal stop remains allophonic. It is inserted by the general phonological rule of Wiese (1996: 59), described in fn. (13), and replaces the otherwise empty onset of the foot of a p-word. So, the p-word status would trigger the occurrence of the glottal stop.

Although this is a correct characterization of the *potential* source of a glottal stop in the phonetic realization of */*in/*, the p-word hypothesis for */*in/* does not answer the essential question, namely, the source of the p-word status of */*in/*. This is the status of a prosodic category and not the status of a lexical category:

„*The prosodic word (a.k.a. phonological word, or p-word) is a constituent that references morphological information in a generalized manner. Its relevance across languages is evidenced in requirements on the minimal permissible size/weight of phonologically free units, and in restrictions and processes referencing a domain greater than the syllable or foot, but smaller than a prosodic phrase.*” (Hildebrandt 2015: 221).

The property of being a p-word is a structural property and not a property of lexical differentiation. Prosodic properties are not generally excluded from subserving lexical differentiation, such as the lexical accent,¹⁸ but [\pm p-word] is no such property. Moreover, the suffix */*in/* would be the only vowel-initial suffix in German with a p-word status. Vowel-initial suffixes are integrated into the stem in German.

¹⁸ In Russian or English, for instance, the position of the word accent can be lexically determined. *Мука* (*múka* = agony) and *мука* (*muká* = flour) are distinguished by accent (s. Hall 2000). In English, the accent distinguishes *insight* [*ˈ*insait] and *incite* [*in*ˈsait], or N^o-V^o-pairs such as *éxport*_N vs. *to export*_V. German offers hardly any examples: *Áugst* (first name) vs. *Augst* (the month August), *Róman* (first name) vs. *Román* (novel).

The two competing analyses do not differ in ascribing p-word status to the new suffix /*in/. They differ with respect to the phonological source of the glottal stop in the onset of /*in/. In the base-form analysis, /*in/ differs from /in/ in the onset. The base form with the glottal stop in the onset is the result of making the non-integrated usage of the suffix compatible with the prosodic structures of German.

Originally, the non-integration was the effect of a reading pronunciation. Any one of the alternative writing conventions in (10) presents the sequence of the noun and the suffix as two separate signs. If pronounced as a *separate* sign, /in/ is subject to the onset-insertion rule and is pronounced with an initial glottal stop. This allophonic glottal stop has been re-analysed as a phonemic glottal stop in the onset of the base form of the new suffix /*in/, setting it off from the existing suffix /in/. Non-integrated suffixes are consonant-initial in German. The p-word status of the new suffix is a collateral property of its consonantal onset.

(10) Chef/in – Chef:in – ChefIn vs. Chef*in

*boss*_{m./fem.} vs. *boss*_{m./fem./div.}

In German, the p-word status is difficult to identify empirically since the factors that reveal a p-word are often masked by interacting, heterogenous factors. Here is an example. There is a form of coordination-reduction that goes beyond lexical word boundaries. It is called *p-word deletion*. Wiese (1996: 70), relying on Booij (1985), employs this phenomenon as diagnosis for p-words (11), under the assumption, that the deleted part of the left conjunct must not be smaller than a p-word.

- (11) a. ~~Ritters~~*chaft*- und Bauern*schaft*
knighth~~ood~~- and peasan*thood*
b. Heiser~~keit~~- oder Übel*keit*
hoarsen~~ess~~- or sickn*ess*
c. *winz- oder ries*ig*
tiny- or mighty
d. *Versicher- und Verwaltun*gen*
insur~~ing~~ or adminstrating (companies)

Deleteable suffixes are those with an initial consonant, such as „*schaft*“ (11a), or „*keit*“ (11b), but not vowel-initial suffixes such as „*ig*“ (14c) or „*ung*“ (14d). The examples (14c,d) are not representative, however. Smith (2003: 217) emphasized that the remaining part of the left conjunct must meet a constraint, too. The remainder must be a lexical item. “winz-“ in (11c) does not meet this requirement, since it is no lexical morpheme. As for the non-deletability of “*ung*”, there are acceptable corpus-search findings such as (12) that seem to contradict:¹⁹

- (12) a. jede Befüllun*g* und Entleerun*g*²⁰
any refilling and emptying
b. eine Vergrößernun*g* oder Verkleinerun*g* des Durchmessers²¹
an increas*ing* or decreasing (of) the diameter

¹⁹ In Richard Wiese’s opinion (p.c. by mail), such examples are phenomena of written professional language.

²⁰ http://www.komfortlüftung.at/fileadmin/komfortlueftung/Klassenzimmer/61_QK_Klassenzimmer_Homepage_mit_Er-laeuterungen_OIB_2017_.pdf

²¹ <https://www.speedweek.com/sbk/news/36930/Ducati-braucht-Trockenheit-zum-Ueberleben.html>

- c. keine Verbesserung oder Verschlechterung²²
no improvement or debasement

P-word deletion, applied to the two variants of the gendering suffix, is expected to discriminate the p-word /*in/ from the integrated syllable /in/. The first one, but not the latter one, ought to be deleteable under p-word deletion. Intriguingly, there is no detectable contrast. Not only the new p-word suffix /*in/, but also the integrated suffix /in/ is acceptable under p-word deletion (13).

- (13)a. die Sänger- und Schauspielerinnen Anna Krämer und Susanne Back²³
b. Schon vorher hatte die Dichter- und Malerin ihre Gedichte äußerst positiv beurteilt.²⁴
c. die begeisterte Reiter- und Schwimmerin²⁵

Note that the remnants in the left conjuncts of (13) are clipped at the morpheme boundaries and not at the syllable boundaries. In the undeleted version, the stem would be re-syllabified, with /r/ becoming the onset of the final syllable, viz. /rin/. Examples such as (13) demonstrate that p-word-deletion is an unreliable criterion for checking the p-word status of /*in/ in contrast to /in/. The only fully reliable criterion is re-syllabification as a property of integrated, vowel-initial suffixes, as illustrated in (9).

The evaluation of the comparison of the two analysis options – different phonological base forms for the two suffixes vs. different prosodic structures – leads to the conclusion that the primary differentiation is segmental. This is an instance of a well-known type of a phonological change that turns an allophone into a phoneme (Kiparsky 2015).

The difference in the prosodic structure is a consequence of the segmental difference. For the alternative account according to which the two suffixes differ primarily in the assignment of the p-word status to the new variant, with glottalization as a secondary effect, compelling, empirically ascertainable facts are wanting.

4. Bottom line

The first step towards the phonemicization of the glottal stop in German, as described above, has been a virtually instantaneous phonological change provoked by fiat. The pronunciation of the suffix /in/ preceded by the “gender star”, viz. /*in/, has created a set of minimal pairs with a phonemic glottal stop since it implied a reanalysis of the syllable-initial glottal stop of the suffix. Presently the situation is diglossic since the politically correct positioning of the glottal stop is mainly confined to public speech and mostly smiled at in every-day conversation.²⁶

²² <https://www.speyer.de/de/standort/bauen/rechtskraeftige-bebauungsplaene/011g-kaserne-lyautey-1-aenderung-baustoffmarkt/011g-begrueundung-internetfassung.pdf?cid=28f>

²³ https://www.schwetzingen-zeitung.de/orte/plankstadt_artikel,-plankstadt-schoene-mannheims-zeigen-best-of-show_arid,1488885.html

²⁴ <http://www.kernstockhaus.at/literaturarchiv/ursel-peter.html>

²⁵ https://www.lokalkompass.de/arnsberg/c-vereine-ehrenamt/felix-bienstein-setzt-sich-gegen-seine-konkurrenten-durch-abwechslungsreiches-programm-fuer-die-kinder_a540649

²⁶ According to a poll by the German TV company ZDF (July 16th 2021, “*Politbarometer*”), with a random sample of 1224 participants, 25% approved the usage of slashes or gender stars, 71% disliked it, and 4% abstained. In Bavarian legal texts, gender asterisks are not admitted (source: Text message of the Bavarian broadcasting company Bayerischer Rundfunk, Sept. 21, 2021). The strict gendering guidelines of Bavarian universities are under scrutiny by the ministry. (<https://www.br.de/nachrichten/bayern/gendersternchen-leitlinien-von-bayerns-unis-werden-ueberprueft,Sj53zJm>). The Prime Minister of Bavaria declares: “*Sprache ist frei*” (‘language

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