

# Writing by principles: German-speaking newspaper guidelines and the use of non-binary gender-fair language

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## Abstract

Previous research into the use of gender-fair noun references in German-speaking newspapers has found an overall increase in the use of gender-fair language (GFL) over the last decade. This trend also extends to the non-binary asterisk and colon. The increased integration of these controversial forms of GFL may suggest that newspaper authors and editors have been placing more importance on gender-related issues. It is therefore unsurprising that, particularly in recent years, more editorial offices have published official guidelines or statements regarding their use of GFL. While some previous studies on the use of GFL in German-speaking media have touched on language guidelines and official statements, a systematic overview that contextualises the use of GFL and published guidelines is lacking. Thus, the aim of this paper is to address this research gap by examining recent official language guidelines and statements from selected German-speaking newspapers and contextualising them with actual GFL usage frequency. To achieve this, newspapers both supporting and opposing the use of special characters were chosen, and the frequency of selected forms of GFL was analysed through a corpus-based study and subsequently compared. The results indicate that newspapers with official guidelines supporting non-binary forms tend to use these forms more frequently. However, the use of such forms is in decline in the selected newspapers, while it is still increasing – albeit at lower frequency levels – in newspapers whose guidelines do not support non-binary forms. Hence, the findings suggest that the relationship between guidelines and GFL usage in the media is far from being straightforward.

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## 1 Introduction

A *Kulturkampf* [‘cultural battle’] is raging in the German-speaking world – a battle surrounding gender-fair language (GFL) (cf. Baum 2023). Many different parties are taking part in the heated and controversial debate, from politicians to journalists and linguists. While some advocates claim that GFL is essential to create a more gender-fair and inclusive society, the opponents speak of an ideological special language that is imposed on the speakers (cf. Verein Deutsche Sprache 2021). Especially person nouns receive significant attention in this debate, as in German, “every noun has a grammatical gender, and the gender of personal nouns tends to express the gender of the referent” (Sczesny/Formanowicz/Moser 2016: 2). Consequently, when referring to mixed-gender groups or to referents whose gender is unknown or irrelevant, the so-called masculine generic is commonly used (cf. Schmitz/Schneider/Essner 2023: 1; Stahlberg et al. 2007). This form is orthographically and phonologically identical to the

masculine explicit (cf. Schmitz/Schneider/Essner 2023: 1) which can result in ambiguity (cf. Ivanov et al. 2018: 267).

From the 1970s onwards, these similarities led to concerns about generically used masculine forms activating a male bias (cf. Trömel-Plötz 1978; Pusch 1979). In order to make women (more) visible in language, attempts were made to compensate for the asymmetry existing in the language system, for instance, through the use of the pair form (*Studentinnen und Studenten*) (cf. Cassaris 2025: 181), the slash (with various alternative usage suggestions) (e. g., *die Lehrer/innen*, *Lehrer/Lehrerinnen*, *Lehrer/-innen* [‘male and female teachers’]) or parentheses (e. g., *Lehrer(innen)*, *Lehrer(-innen)* [‘male and female teachers’]), as alternatives to generically used masculine forms such as *die Lehrer* [‘male teachers/teachers’] (cf. Cassaris 2025: 182).

In 1981, the capital-I was invented for the same purpose (*LehrerInnen* [‘male and female teachers’]) (cf. Cassaris 2025: 183). It was subsequently adopted by some German-speaking newspapers as the default, such as the Swiss *Wochenzeitung* (WOZ) and the German *tageszeitung* (taz) (cf. Cassaris 2025: 183; Tolmein 2014). However, when the binary conception of gender identity started to be increasingly questioned, the focus of GFL shifted towards the “de-construction of gender” (Wetschanow 2017: 34) and hence the capital-I began to attract criticism for its binarity. To go beyond the binary, Steffen Kitty Hermann suggested in 2003 the use of the gender gap, initially in combination with the capital-I (cf. Cassaris 2025: 186) (*Lehrer\_Innen* [‘all teachers’], nowadays usually *Lehrer\_innen*), aiming to address all those who feel excluded from the binary order or do not want to be part of it (cf. s\_he 2003). Since then, various neutralisation, binary, and non-binary strategies have been proposed to make German person nouns more gender-fair. Table 1 gives an overview of some of the main strategies used in German (for a more comprehensive overview cf. Cassaris 2025: 181–215).

Strategy	Form	Examples singular	Examples plural	Translation
Neutralisation strategies	Collectives	Lehrpersonal	-	Teaching personnel
	Present participle constructions	<i>Lehrende</i>	<i>Lehrende</i>	
	Gender-neutral nouns	<i>Lehrkraft</i>	<i>Lehrkräfte</i>	
Binary feminisation strategies	Paired form (masc.-fem.)	<i>Lehrer und Lehrerin;</i>	<i>Lehrer und Lehrerinnen;</i>	Male and female teacher(s)
	Paired form (fem.-masc.)	<i>Lehrerin und Lehrer</i>	<i>Lehrerinnen und Lehrer</i>	
	Slash	<i>Lehrer/in</i>	<i>Lehrer/innen</i>	
	Slash Dash	<i>Lehrer/-in</i>	<i>Lehrer/-innen</i>	
	Dash	<i>Lehrer-in</i>	<i>Lehrer-innen</i>	
	Capital-I	<i>LehrerIn</i>	<i>LehrerInnen</i>	
Non-binary, queer strategies	Parentheses	<i>Lehrer(in)</i>	<i>Lehrer(innen)</i>	Male, female, non-binary, queer teacher(s)
	Asterisk	<i>Lehrer*in</i>	<i>Lehrer*innen</i>	
	Colon	<i>Lehrer:in</i>	<i>Lehrer:innen</i>	
	Gap	<i>Lehrer_in</i>	<i>Lehrer_innen</i>	

**Table 1** Neutralisation, binary, and non-binary strategies in German (cf. Link 2025)

To address the use of these strategies and forms, many public institutions and private companies have published guidelines on their use. In Austria and Germany, linguists began publishing guidelines on GFL as early as the 1980s (cf. Siegenthaler 2022: 162). GFL guidelines can be defined as documents that provide ways of representing people in (written) language. Their purpose is to support practical language use by explaining a specific linguistic approach and demonstrating how it can be implemented (cf. Elmiger et al. 2017: 6). Prototypically, they consist of an explanation of why GFL is needed, a guide to its practical implementation with specific negative and positive examples, and a breakdown of different strategies (cf. Elmiger 2021). Thus, guidelines primarily fulfil three tasks: providing information (about different forms of GFL), raising awareness (of one's own language use), and supporting practical implementation (using concrete examples) (cf. Ivanov/Lieboldt 2023: 36).

Not all of the proposed strategies are perceived and accepted equally, a fact that is reflected in GFL guidelines. For instance, gender-neutral nouns and the pair form (cf. Table 1) are widely accepted and promoted by official guidelines (cf. Gesellschaft für Deutsche Sprache 2020; Cas-saris 2025: 182). However, the use of special characters – particularly non-binary forms and the binary capital-I – is highly controversial. The *Rat für deutsche Rechtschreibung* [‘Council for German Orthography’], for example, does not regard them as a core part of German orthography (cf. Rat für deutsche Rechtschreibung 2023).

Guidelines for GFL as a text genre have also attracted interest in the field of linguistics. This is reflected in an increasing number of studies and guideline collections (e. g., Wetschanow 2017; Siegenthaler 2021, 2022, 2024; Schneider 2022; Ivanov/Lieboldt 2023: 36; Elmiger 2024; Brambilla/Crestani 2024; Breuer/Trappmann 2024). Alongside these studies, the actual use of GFL has been increasingly researched, including its use in the media (cf. Bühlmann 2002; Demey 2002; Sökefeld 2021; Waldendorf 2023a; Link 2022, 2024, 2025). Regarding German-speaking newspapers, it has been found that the use of GFL has increased over the past decade. Despite the ongoing controversy, non-binary strategies are also increasingly used (cf. Sökefeld 2021; Waldendorf 2023a; Link 2024, 2025). Consequently, GFL has become a more prominent topic in journalism, prompting an increasing number of editorial boards to release official guidelines or statements on the use of GFL, specifically focusing on special characters.

Thus far, no research has contextualised official editorial guidelines and their actual implementation. This paper aims to close this research gap by investigating the extent to which authors adhere to their editorial board's guidelines and whether clear differences can be observed between newspapers with official guidelines supporting the use of special characters and those opposing them. To achieve this, various newspapers officially in favour of and opposed to the use of special characters were selected. Consequently, the usage frequency of selected forms of GFL was compared across these newspapers through a corpus-based analysis.

## 2 GFL in the German-speaking media – a research overview

Within the last few years, several significant contributions to the research on the use of GFL in German-speaking media have been published. The first studies on GFL usage in German-speaking newspapers date back to 2002. That year, Bühlmann analysed six randomly chosen articles from three Swiss newspapers – *Tages-Anzeiger*, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ), and *Blick* – regarding the use of non-sexist alternatives to the generically used masculine forms (cf.

Bühlmann 2002). She reported that Swiss newspapers used neutral forms in 18.4% of cases, while binary strategies, such as the pair form, made up only 3.8% of the dataset (cf. Bühlmann 2002: 170). The same year, Demey researched the use of generic person references in German newspaper articles from a feminist linguistics perspective, finding that neutralisation was frequently used alongside generically used masculine forms (cf. Demey 2002). Given the publication dates, non-binary forms were not included in these studies, as the gender gap was only just about to be invented (cf. section 1), and the asterisk and the colon followed even later. Therefore, the studies focused on neutralisation strategies and generically used masculine forms (cf. Demey 2002), as well as the binary pair form and collective forms (cf. Bühlmann 2002).

In 2021, GFL usage in German newspapers was researched further, when Sökefeld analysed the politics sections of seven selected German newspapers from 2019: *Bild*, *Frankfurter Rundschau* (FR), *Neues Deutschland*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ), *die tageszeitung* (taz), *Die Welt*, and *Die Zeit* (cf. Sökefeld 2021: 119). She reports that neutral forms accounted for 40.13% of forms in the analysed dataset while binary strategies, such as the pair form, made up only 2.58%, and non-binary forms 1.33% (cf. Sökefeld 2021: 120).

Sökefeld's study was complemented by an analysis by Link (2022), in which sixty articles from 2022 were analysed from each of the three most widely circulated German dailies – *Bild*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ), and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) – as well as the most widely circulated weekly newspaper, *Die Zeit*, regarding GFL usage (cf. Link 2022: 49). Similar to Sökefeld's findings, the results indicated that the selected newspapers predominantly use neutralisation strategies. However, some newspapers made use of the pair form nearly as frequently (cf. Link 2022: 51f.).

While these studies worked with relatively small datasets and initially considered generically used masculine forms alongside neutralisation as well as binary and, in the case of the last two studies, non-binary strategies, the first more comprehensive study focusing exclusively on binary and non-binary GFL strategies in German newspapers was published in 2023 by Waldendorf (2023a). This study analysed the frequency of GFL usage in *Die Welt*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ), *Der Spiegel*, *Spiegel Online*, *Die Zeit*, and *tageszeitung* (taz) between 2000 and 2021, using the German Reference Corpus and scraped articles (cf. Waldendorf 2023a).

This was followed by another corpus-based study comparing the use of binary and non-binary strategies in German (*Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ), *Die Welt*), Swiss (*Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ), *Tages-Anzeiger*), and Austrian (*Der Standard*, *Kleine Zeitung*) newspapers between 2003 and 2023 (cf. Link 2024). The study's findings that Austrian newspapers used GFL more frequently than their German and Swiss counterparts (cf. Link 2024), resulted in Link (2025) dedicating a study exclusively to the use of GFL in Austrian newspapers.

All three corpus-based studies attested to an overall increase in the use of GFL, beginning between 2015 and 2018, with binary forms dominating (cf. Waldendorf 2023a; Link 2024, 2025). Among the binary forms, the pair form has seen increased usage, while the capital-I has declined, and other binary forms rarely appear. Non-binary forms, particularly the colon and the asterisk, have also been reported as increasingly used, while the gender gap appears infrequently (cf. Waldendorf 2023a; Link 2024, 2025). Further, differences between German-speaking countries in both the frequency and types of GFL used were identified, and it was shown

that political orientation and the use of GFL, especially non-binary forms, are not necessarily related (cf. Link 2024, 2025).

Thus, recent research on GFL usage in German-speaking media shows that not only is GFL usage increasing, but even the highly controversial non-binary forms have been used more frequently within the last few years. Seemingly in response to this increased use of GFL, more editorial offices are addressing the issue by publishing official statements or guidelines regarding their GFL usage (cf. Waldendorf 2023a: 13f.). Hence, the question arises, to what extent the recommendations of these guidelines are reflected in actual GFL use.

### 3 Methodology

To systematically contextualise published guidelines and statements with the use of special characters in GFL within German-speaking newspapers, a suitable corpus for the frequency analysis (cf. section 3.1) and newspapers with different approaches to GFL (cf. section 3.2) had to be chosen. While some editorial boards provide their employees with GFL guidelines containing information on why and how to use GFL (cf. section 1), some only publish official statements with their position on the matter. For the following analysis, both guidelines and statements were considered.

#### 3.1 Corpus analysis

For the frequency analysis, the IDS German Reference Corpus (DeReKo) (cf. Leibniz-Institut für Deutsche Sprache 2024) was selected, as it is particularly well-suited for this type of investigation. The corpus offers an extensive dataset and, by using specific regular expressions<sup>1</sup>, it allows for a completely automated search for gender-fair noun references (cf. COSMAS II, Zentrale DV-Dienste 2020). Additionally, DeReKo provides relative frequency values measuring how many hits occur per million words (pmw), enabling reliable comparisons across different newspapers.

While special characters in GFL include the capital-I and other binary forms, this study focuses on the asterisk and colon. Several factors informed this decision: previous studies have demonstrated that the non-binary gender gap, as well as binary strategies involving special characters other than the capital-I (cf. Table 1), are rarely used in the media (cf. Waldendorf 2023a; Link 2024, 2025). Furthermore, while the capital-I was once more prevalent, recent findings suggest a decline in its usage (cf. Waldendorf 2023a; Link 2024, 2025). Consequently, although special characters encompass more than just the asterisk and colon, these two forms have been shown to be the most prominent and relevant in German-speaking media in recent years. This is also reflected in the media guidelines summarised in Table 2 (cf. section 4.1), making them the focus of the analysis.

Since the colon and asterisk are relatively recent developments, with the asterisk emerging roughly a decade ago and the colon around 2020, the corpus analysis was limited to the timeframe of 2015–2023. Unfortunately, data for 2024 was not yet available in DeReKo. The

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<sup>1</sup> Regular expression to identify noun references with asterisk: `#REG(^[A-Z][a-z]+[*]in$ ) OR #REG(^[A-Z][a-z]+[*]innen$ )`; regular expression to identify noun references with colon `#REG(^[A-Z][a-z]+[:]in$ ) OR #REG(^[A-Z][a-z]+[:]innen$ )`

results provided encapsulate all occurrences of non-binary colon and asterisk in singular and plural. Despite the highly automatised search process, all outcomes were manually validated twice by the same annotator, looking for false positives to ensure reliability of the data.

### 3.2 Newspaper selection

In her study from 2002, Bühlmann reported that none of the three Swiss newspapers investigated had published clear guidelines or released statements regarding their use of GFL (cf. Bühlmann 2002: 166). Nearly 20 years later, Sökefeld found that the three German newspapers, that used all forms of GFL analysed in her study – namely *Neues Deutschland*, *tageszeitung* (taz), and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ) – also did not have official, public guidelines. However, the SZ had non-binding guidelines favouring binary and neutralisation forms while discouraging special characters such as the asterisk and capital-I (cf. Sökefeld 2021: 122). Some years later, Waldendorf reported that *Der Spiegel* and SZ published official guidelines/statements in 2021, while *Die Zeit* reaffirmed its statement from 2018 in 2021 (cf. Waldendorf 2023b: 13). All three newspapers positioned themselves in favour of using the binary pair form and neutralisation strategies rather than non-binary forms, such as the asterisk and colon (ibid.: 13). At the same time, other newspapers, such as *Die Welt*, had not published any official guidelines or statements by 2021 (cf. Waldendorf 2023a: 5).

In an exploratory approach, official guidelines and statements from German-speaking newspapers were searched for and subsequently categorised. Previous research (cf. ibid.) and articles about the use of GFL in German-speaking newspapers (cf. Zylka/Grimberg 2021; Haeming 2023) served as starting points. During this exploration, it became apparent that:

- a) most guidelines were published around 2020/2021,
- b) most of these guidelines have not been revised since,
- c) some newspapers have not published any statements or guidelines on the use of GFL, potentially to avoid alienating readers, and
- d) most editorial boards that have published guidelines favour neutralisation strategies and the pair form while rejecting special characters.

In this context, it is notable that, although special characters appear in both binary and non-binary strategies of GFL (cf. Table 1), many editorial boards refer exclusively to non-binary forms when discussing special characters – for example, *Der Spiegel* and *Der Standard* (cf. Table 2).

Since most editorial guidelines reject the use of special characters, particularly non-binary forms, identifying newspapers that actively support the use of non-binary forms was challenging. Even *tageszeitung* (taz), one of the first newspapers in Germany to use GFL in the form of the capital-I (cf. section 1), intentionally does not set specific guidelines (cf. Winkelmann 2021). Other newspapers, such as the *Tagesspiegel*, previously supported the use of non-binary forms but later revised their guidelines (cf. Haselberger et al. 2021/2023). It would be of interest to examine whether such changes are reflected in the use of GFL, however, given that the guideline adaptation occurred only in 2023, any resulting changes might not be visible yet. Additionally, there is no data for 2023 for the *Tagesspiegel* in the chosen corpus, rendering such an analysis impossible.

After extensive research, only one German-speaking newspaper and one magazine present in the chosen corpus were identified as officially encouraging the use of non-binary forms: the *Frankfurter Rundschau* (FR) and *Zeit Campus*. While *Frankfurter Rundschau* (FR) is a newspaper and therefore covers current topics from politics to sport on a daily basis, *Zeit Campus* is a bimonthly magazine that focuses on various topics relevant to its target audience – students.

Although the initial aim was to select three newspapers supporting non-binary forms and three opposing them, the findings of the exploratory search did not allow this. Instead, the two newspapers/magazines supporting non-binary special characters were complemented by four newspapers/magazines supporting the pair form and neutralisation strategies but not non-binary special characters. These are the Austrian *Der Standard*, the Swiss *St. Galler Tagblatt*, the German daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ), and the German magazine *Der Spiegel*. It should be noted that the study aimed to include newspapers from each of the three countries with the highest numbers of German speakers. While this was achieved, it was not possible to choose them in a way that the distribution between countries was completely equal. Hence, for the analysis the following six newspapers and magazines were selected: *Frankfurter Rundschau* (FR) (Germany), *Zeit Campus* (Germany), *Der Standard* (Austria), *St. Galler Tagblatt* (Switzerland), *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ) (Germany), and *Der Spiegel* (Germany).

#### 4 Guidelines

The guidelines and statements from the selected newspapers differ not only in their content regarding which forms of GFL they suggest but also in whether, and to what extent, they explain the motivations behind their recommendations. FR and *Zeit Campus*, the newspaper and magazine that support non-binary forms, published their statements in 2020 and 2021, respectively, opting for the use of the colon (cf. Table 2). Previous studies on the use of GFL in German-speaking media report that the colon is the latest “invention”, with its usage in media only emerging in recent years. Since around 2021/2022, it has become the most frequently used non-binary form (cf. Waldendorf 2023a; Link 2024, 2025). Given the publication dates of the guidelines, it is therefore perhaps unsurprising that the most recent non-binary form at the time was chosen as the default.

Prior to the decision to use the colon, FR explicitly addressed its readers with the suggestion of adopting the colon, asking for their opinions (cf. Kaspar 2020). Their rationale for using the colon is explained by their role-model function as a newspaper. The editorial board argues that authors have a particular responsibility regarding language and the implicit values conveyed in every word, aiming to promote justice in all texts (cf. Kaspar 2020). *Zeit Campus* states that their decision for using the colon is a response to repeated requests from its young readers, aiming at reflecting real-life diversity in language (cf. Kix/Franzke/Seifert 2021).

Support of the use of non-binary special characters		
Newspaper and publication date of guidelines	Statement summary	
<i>Frankfurter Rundschau</i> – 2020	Editor-in-chief of the FR announces on the front page of 05.09.2020 that the newspaper will switch to a GFL (Mertens 2020), suggesting the use of the colon (cf. Kaspar 2020).	
<i>Zeit Campus</i> – 2021	<i>Zeit Campus</i> has opted for the colon, both in online articles and the printed magazine. However, to prevent the colon from getting out of hand, neutral forms are used wherever possible (cf. Kix/Franzke/Seifert 2021).	
Support of pair form and neutralisation but not of special characters/non-binary forms		
Newspaper and publication date of guidelines	Statement summary	Exceptions
<i>Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ)</i> – 2020/21	Gender-sensitive language is not a matter of special characters and therefore authors do not use the capital-I, colon, gender gap and asterisk. Instead, authors should use pair forms, neutralisations, avoid role clichés and purely gender-specific job titles (cf. Wittwer 2021).	If a non-binary person, a guest author or a columnist insists on the use of a special character, the background to this is discussed in the article or in the footnote (cf. Wittwer 2021). Further, the online magazine <i>jetzt</i> makes use of asterisk (cf. von Bullion 2020).
<i>Der Standard</i> – 2023	Avoids generic masculine by using participles, terms that are as gender-neutral as possible, the pair form or the generic feminine, as long as this does not cause confusion (cf. Kotynek 2023).	The use of a colon as a special character is permitted in guest commentaries and interviews, in the feminism section “dieStandard.at” and in quotes and subtitles of videos (cf. Kotynek 2023).
<i>St. Galler Tagblatt</i> (CH Media Group) – 2021	Avoids generically used masculine forms by using pair forms or other paraphrases. Special characters such as the colon, the capital-I or the asterisk are not used (cf. Hollenstein 2021).	The colon is allowed on social media such as Facebook, Instagram or Twitter (cf. Hollenstein 2021).
<i>Der Spiegel</i> – 2021	Generically used masculine forms should no longer be the standard. Instead, the pair form, gender-neutral terms or clever terms and paraphrases should be used. Special characters are not used, and no one will be forced to use special characters (cf. <i>Der Spiegel</i> 2021).	Special characters, in the form of the colon, may be used by external authors and interview partners, editors in columns and very personal commentaries and essays, on Instagram, in the Start section (cf. <i>Der Spiegel</i> 2021).

**Table 2: Official statements and guidelines for the use of GFL from selected German-speaking newspapers**

Among the four newspapers not supporting the use of special characters, the specificity of their recommendations varies. Generally, all recommend the use of the pair form and neutralisation strategies (cf. Table 2). *Süddeutsche Zeitung* explicitly states that special characters – including the capital-I, colon, gender gap, and asterisk – are not used by its authors, while the use of the

pair form and neutralisations, as well as the avoidance of role clichés and gender-specific job titles are encouraged (cf. Table 2). However, no detailed guidance is provided on which specific neutralisation strategies should be employed. The newspaper states that it relies on the recommendations of the *Rat für deutsche Rechtschreibung* [‘Council for German Orthography’] (cf. section 1). Similar to FR, SZ argues that newspaper authors serve as linguistic role models. However, it contends that this entails writing in a way that ensures texts are comprehensible to as many readers as possible. Further, SZ seeks to prevent young readers from encountering language or spelling that are considered incorrect in school (cf. Wittwer 2021).

The guidelines from *Der Standard* particularly encourage authors to avoid generically used masculine forms by using participles, gender-neutral terms, the pair form, or even the feminine generic, provided its meaning is clear (cf. Table 2), with the aim to avoid the negative consequences of language dominated by the masculine form and to make all genders visible (cf. Kotynek 2023). Similarly, the CH Media Group, which operates the *St. Galler Tagblatt*, advises authors to avoid generically used masculine forms and suggests using the pair form or other paraphrases. Special characters such as the colon, capital-I, or asterisk are explicitly discouraged (cf. Table 2). The CH Media Group argues that the flow of speech should always remain a high priority while also ensuring that women receive the linguistic representation they deserve (cf. Hollenstein 2021).

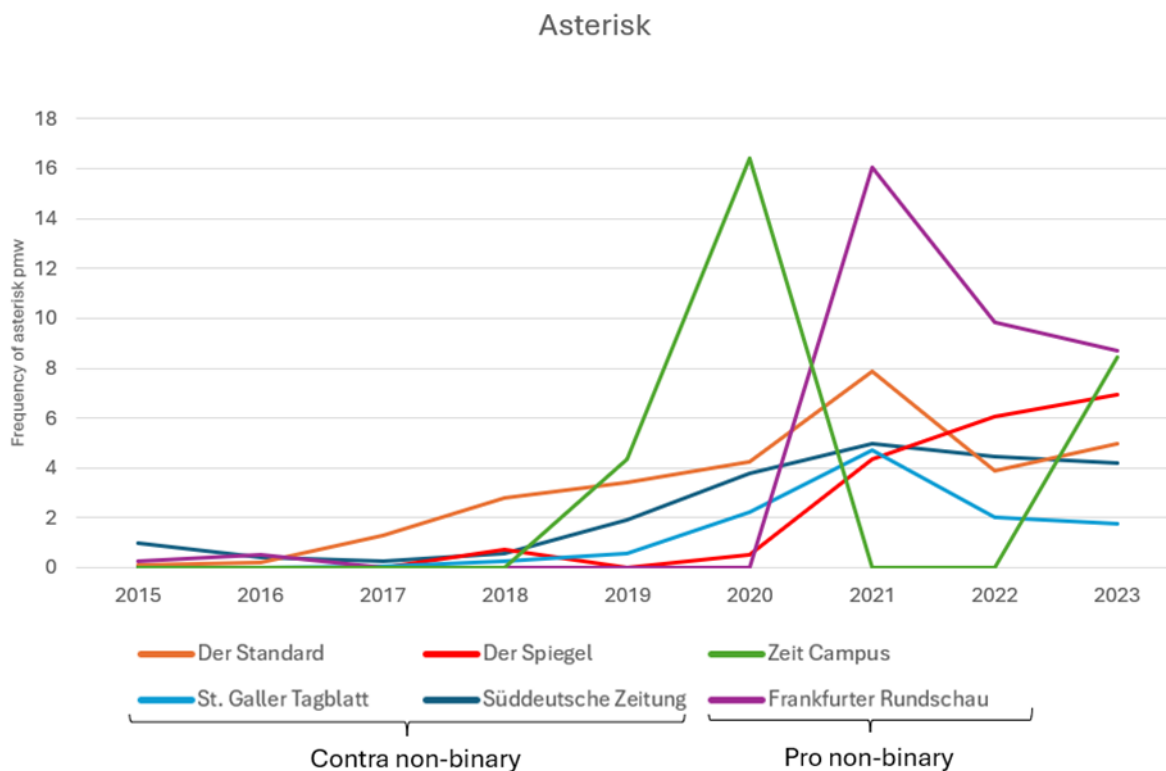
Finally, *Der Spiegel* discourages the use of generically used masculine forms as the default and recommends the pair form, gender-neutral terms, or creative paraphrasing. It also discourages special characters and explicitly states that authors will not be forced to use them (cf. Table 2). Its published guidelines are binding, and while not every text has to be fully formulated in GFL, it should be applied as widely as possible, with compliance monitored accordingly (cf. *Der Spiegel* 2021; Klusmann 2020).

Despite their general opposition to special characters and consequently non-binary forms, all four newspapers include exceptions for their use. These exceptions apply, for instance, to guest authors, interview partners, or social media content (cf. Table 2). When non-binary forms are used, *Der Spiegel*, *Der Standard*, and *St. Galler Tagblatt* all prefer the colon, while in the online magazine *jetzt*, associated with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the asterisk should be used, according to the 2020 statement. Thus, while the newspapers that support non-binary forms recommend the use of the colon, those opposed to special characters provide their authors with guidance of varying precision, often offering relatively vague instructions on how greater gender-fairness should be achieved linguistically. However, there is a general agreement that generically used masculine forms should be avoided.

## 5 Results of the corpus-based frequency analysis

Figure 1 illustrates that the two newspapers/magazines advocating for non-binary forms – *Zeit Campus* and *FR* – have generally used the asterisk more frequently than the other four newspapers since 2019 and 2020, respectively. For *Zeit Campus*, the frequency of the asterisk rose from 4.3 pmw in 2019 to 16.4 pmw in 2021, however, followed by a two-year hiatus in its usage before increasing to 8.5 pmw in 2023. *FR* exhibited a peak in the usage frequency of the asterisk in 2021, reaching 16.1 pmw, which then declined to 8.7 pmw by 2023 (cf. Figure 1). Prior to 2019, *Der Standard* used the asterisk most frequently among the analysed newspapers.

Notably, all newspapers – except for *Zeit Campus* and *Der Spiegel* – demonstrated a peak in asterisk usage in 2021 (cf. Figure 1). In 2023, the use of the asterisk showed a resurgence, particularly in *Zeit Campus* and, to a lesser extent, in *Der Standard* and *Der Spiegel* (cf. Figure 1).

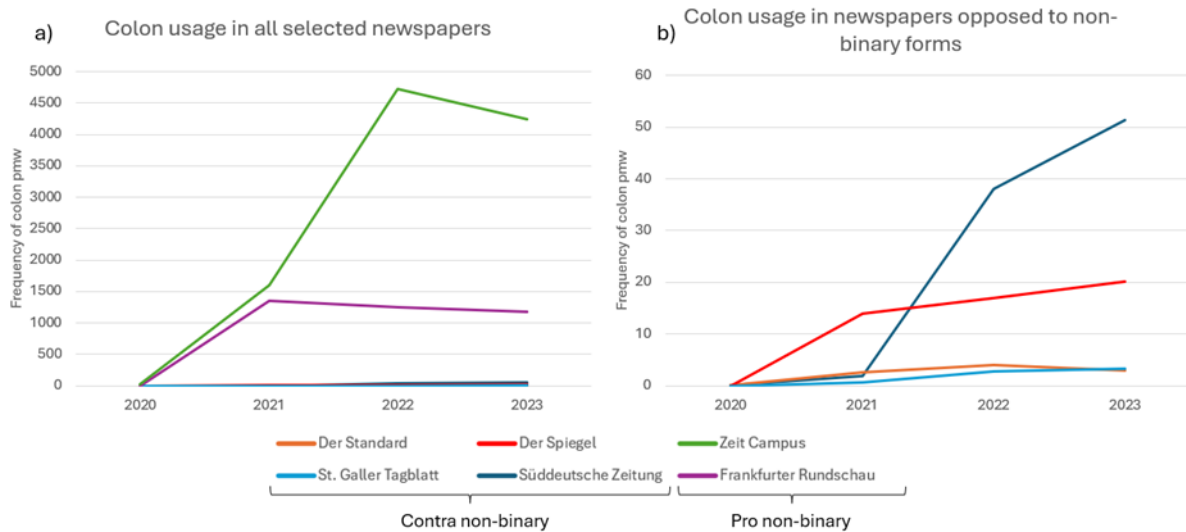


**Figure1: Use of asterisk across selected newspapers**

The colon first appeared in the chosen corpus across the selected newspapers in 2020. Figure 2a shows the frequency of the colon between 2020 and 2023 in all analysed newspapers, while Figure 2b zooms in on the four newspapers that are not in support of using non-binary forms. Figure 2a illustrates that the two newspapers in favour of non-binary forms use the colon much more frequently than the other four newspapers. However, in both newspapers, the use of the colon has recently been in decline. In the case of FR, the use of the colon has decreased from 1240 pmw in 2021 to 1175 pmw in 2023 and in *Zeit Campus* from 4718 pmw in 2022 to 4239 pmw in 2023 (cf. Figure 2a).

Figure 2b focuses on the use of the colon in the four newspapers that do not support the use of non-binary forms. In all four newspapers, an increased frequency in the use of the colon can be observed between 2020 and 2023 (cf. Figure 2b). While the relative frequency values for *Der Standard* and *St. Galler Tagblatt* remain low, *Der Spiegel* and especially SZ exhibit a sharp increase in the use of the colon between 2021 and 2023, with an increase from 14 pmw to 21 pmw and 2 pmw to 51 pmw, respectively (cf. Figure 2b). While especially in the SZ the increase seems sharp, it should be noted that the use of the colon in the SZ in 2022 accounts for only about one percent of usage in *Zeit Campus* (cf. Figure 2a and b). Except for *Der Standard*, the use of the colon is still increasing across newspapers.

Overall, the colon exhibits a much higher frequency than the asterisk within the last few years (cf. Figures 1 and 2a and b). This finding aligns with previous studies, which report that the colon has been the most frequently used non-binary form since 2021/2022 in German-speaking newspapers (cf. Waldendorf 2023a; Link 2024, 2025).



**Figure 2a and 2b: Use of colon across all selected newspapers (a) and across the four newspapers opposed to the use of non-binary forms (b)**

## 6 Discussion and conclusion

While the study's findings contribute to a better understanding of the connection between GFL usage and guidelines in the German-speaking media, they indicate that the matter is rather complex. In line with results regarding GFL guidelines at Swiss universities and colleges, most editorial offices tend to be cautious with their suggestions and recommendations, primarily focusing on neutralisation strategies and the visualisation of women, while making the use of more controversial non-binary forms an exception (cf. Siegenthaler 2021: 85). At the same time, the findings do not support results that showed binary strategies are beginning to be replaced in favour of newer, more inclusive forms, especially the asterisk (cf. Siegenthaler 2022: 178). In the media context, the colon is by far the preferred option, and its primary usage recommendation in the analysed guidelines aligns with its increased usage in the German-speaking media (cf. Waldendorf 2023a; Link 2024, 2025).

Regarding the two newspapers favouring non-binary forms, different dynamics emerge. In the case of the FR, the data shows a clear and drastic increase in the use of the colon and asterisk between 2020 and 2021. Prior to this, non-binary forms were not used (cf. also Sökefeld 2021: 122). This suggests that the official statement published in 2020 likely triggered the increased use of non-binary forms. The statement particularly emphasises the use of the colon, which exhibits a much higher frequency in the dataset. However, in contrast to the expectations set by the guidelines, the use of the colon (and the asterisk) has been decreasing since 2021. Nevertheless, it should be noted that in both cases, the decrease is roughly 10%, which seems too low to draw conclusions.

The development and dynamics in *Zeit Campus* differ slightly. The use of the asterisk peaked in 2020, and the colon was also already used quite frequently by the magazine throughout the

year 2021 and hence before the publication of the official statement in October 2021. However, following the statement, an even steeper increase in the use of the colon can be observed between 2021 and 2022. Thus, while the increased use of non-binary forms in the FR is likely tied to their official statement, the timeline at *Zeit Campus* is less clear. Both the colon and asterisk were already in use before the statement was released, although the colon's use surged afterward. Given that *Zeit Campus* targets students and explicitly states that many students use GFL, with readers repeatedly requesting its adoption (cf. Kix/Franzke/Seifert 2021), the magazine may have started using GFL before the publication of its official statement, intending to reflect its readers' assumed language use. However, similar to FR, the use of the colon in *Zeit Campus* has also been declining since 2022.

The situation becomes even more complex when examining newspapers not supporting the use of special characters, and thus non-binary forms. All four newspapers began using the asterisk with increasing frequency starting from 2016 (*Der Standard*), 2019 (SZ, *St. Galler Tagblatt*), and 2020 (*Der Spiegel*), peaking in 2021. This peak has been previously identified in earlier studies (cf. Link 2024, 2025) and shows an increased adoption of the asterisk – albeit at relatively low levels – prior to the introduction of official statements or guidelines. After 2021, the frequency of asterisk usage declined in SZ and *St. Galler Tagblatt*, potentially as an effect of the guidelines. However, this decline was not observed in the other two newspapers. In fact, in *Der Spiegel*, the use of the asterisk continued to increase until 2023. This contradicts the 2021 guidelines, which discouraged special characters and recommended the colon as the preferred option (cf. Table 2). Similarly, the use of the asterisk in *Der Standard* has been rising again since 2022 contrary to the guidelines published in 2021 which only encourage its use in certain limited contexts (cf. Table 2). However, it should be noted that the resulting values are very low, implying that they must be treated with caution, as low values may result from individual texts or authors.

Similar to the asterisk, the colon is used far less frequently by the four newspapers opposed to non-binary forms compared to those in favour. However, three of these four newspapers have increasingly incorporated the colon in their texts between 2020 and 2023, whereas *Zeit Campus* and FR have shown a decreasing frequency since 2021 and 2022, respectively. While this decrease could be a variation in use rather than an actual decline, it is rather surprising that the colon has seemingly been in decline in newspapers encouraging its usage over the past few years, whereas this trend cannot be observed in newspapers opposing special characters. These results indicate that the connection between cause and consequence regarding the use of GFL and the impact of guidelines or official statements is not straight-forward. While the official statement released by FR appears to have initially influenced the use of non-binary forms in the newspaper, the same cannot be said for the other newspapers and magazines. In this context it should also be noted that only *Der Spiegel* explicitly states that its guidelines are binding. Similar to the context of university GFL guidelines, it often remains unclear how binding the respective guidelines are (cf. Siegenthaler 2021: 82). This vagueness may explain the lack of a clear pattern, as authors might implement the suggestions in different ways.

Nevertheless, in all the guidelines analysed, the use of generically used masculine forms as the default is discouraged. The current study, however, does not allow for drawing conclusions about the relationship between GFL usage and the use of generically used masculine forms.

Therefore, further research examining other forms of GFL and generically used masculine forms is needed to provide insights into how these forms relate to one another and how this is reflected in the guidelines.

Despite being frequently vague, all guidelines include a clear standpoint regarding the use of special characters. However, their reasoning behind the decision often differs. For instance, it is noteworthy that both SZ and FR base their arguments in favour of or against using forms with special characters on the role model function of journalists. Furthermore, an interesting argument against the use of non-binary forms comes from SZ, which states that they seek to prevent young readers from encountering language or spelling that are considered incorrect in school (cf. section 4). This argument is somewhat surprising, given that in only two out of the 16 federal states is the use of special characters marked as an error in school (cf. Schmoll 2024). Therefore, in the future, the quantitative approach of this study should be complemented by a qualitative component, e. g., interviews with editors, as such interviews could help uncover more about the actual decision-making processes behind the guidelines and their binding nature.

This could be especially useful given that the results indicate that for most newspapers, there is hardly any connection between their guidelines and their actual implementation of GFL usage, highlighting the intricate dynamics associated with the use of GFL in German-speaking newspapers. The results, on the one hand, confirm the observation by Waldendorf (2023a) that guidelines and statements were mainly released as a reaction to the increasing use of GFL, rather than being the cause of more or less GFL usage – with the exception of FR. On the other hand, the guidelines and statements seem to serve primarily to shape a certain image and public perception, without necessarily leading to an increase or decrease in the use of non-binary forms of GFL. Future research could test whether newspapers indeed primarily use guidelines and statements for image purposes by expanding on this study through identifying additional newspapers that support non-binary forms. Moreover, a more in-depth contextual analysis could further clarify whether non-binary forms are indeed intended as such.

Another factor that must be taken into account is that the use and perception of GFL differ across countries. It was found that Swiss newspapers mainly use binary forms, whereas German-and even more so, Austrian – newspapers integrate more varied strategies (cf. Link 2024). This difference might be the result of the fact that Austria and Germany officially allow third gender entry in the civil status register, while Switzerland does not (cf. Siegenthaler 2022: 170). Furthermore, regarding the non-binary colon, it has been suggested that its use may have originated in the German media before spreading to Austria with a temporal delay (cf. Link 2025). Hence, given that the guidelines analysed in this study come from newspapers and magazines across three countries, country-specific differences may influence both the creation of guidelines and their implementation. Therefore, the uneven distribution of newspapers selected from the three countries does limit the interpretation of the results and implies that further research, with a more balanced selection of newspapers from all three countries, is needed.

Thus, while this study contributes to the still limited research on guidelines and the actual use of GFL, it represents a first step. Further research – particularly of a qualitative nature is required to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics between GFL guidelines and GFL use.

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