

Not binary, not human?

The discursive construction of nonbinary and gender-nonconforming individuals as subhuman in German social media comments

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Abstract

In late 2018, a third legal gender category (called *divers* ‘diverse’) was established in German legislation. The legal recognition of a nonbinary gender in Germany is juxtaposed against a non-existent linguistic inventory for speaking to or about nonbinary individuals: there are currently neither established formal forms of address nor a gender-neutral third person pronoun that is suitable for human referents and in wider use, despite German having a grammatical three-gender system (masculine, feminine, neuter). Although it could be assumed that the third grammatical gender not tied to masculinity or femininity might serve as a gender-neutral alternative, this is not the case as it is largely used for inanimate objects and can be utilised in practices of denigration towards women, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming people.

With people outside the gender binary gaining more rights and becoming more visible in society and media, they also increasingly become targets in hateful online discourse. This paper investigates online hate speech targeted at nonbinary and gender-nonconforming people in German social media, analysing it for denigrating and othering patterns of language use. Particular emphasis is placed on the use of neuter gender reference to these groups and individuals in order to gain more insight into the discourse semantics of the irregular – i.e. not triggered by regular noun gender – assignment of neuter gender to humans. Analysing the comment sections of articles on the introduction of a third gender option, gender-neutral language use, and nonbinary individuals posted on the Facebook pages of major German newspapers, this study aims to shed light on the linguistic practices employed in hateful discourse on people who do not comply with hegemonic gender norms. The analysis shows that the cognitive link of neuter grammatical gender with inanimate objects is used as a mental frame in the dehumanisation of nonbinary individuals, which in combination with lexical forms of othering and denigration places people outside the gender binary outside of and below humankind.

1 Introduction

The understanding of gender as a strict dichotomy of male and female based on genital configuration is deeply ingrained in Western societies. While the rigidity of this binary conceptualisation of gender has lessened throughout the last few decades due to an increased awareness of

trans – and to a lesser degree intersex – people’s experiences, the fundamental belief that “there are only two genders” is still a central feature of public opinion and cultural structures, and is currently seeing a resurgence fuelled by increasingly conservative and authoritarian regimes in Western countries. This idea of gender as binary conflicts with debates around, and the actual introduction of, third legal gender options, such as in Germany, where the third gender category “diverse” was legally established in late 2018.

This legal recognition of a nonbinary gender in Germany is juxtaposed against a non-existent linguistic inventory for speaking about nonbinary individuals: there is currently no established gender-neutral third person pronoun that is both suitable for human referents and in wider use. This lack of gender-neutral pronominal reference forms might appear surprising as German has a three-gender grammatical system (masculine, feminine and neuter), and one might assume that this third neuter gender could be a suitable way to refer to nonbinary individuals. The neuter gender, however, is largely used for inanimate objects – in the few cases where terms of person reference appear in neuter gender, these terms denote immature humans (e. g. *das Kind* ‘the [n.] child’, *das Baby* ‘the [n.] baby’, *das Mädchen* ‘the [n.] girl’) or women who deviate from socially valued ideas of ‘proper womanhood’ (e. g. *das Weib* ‘the [n.] hag’, *das Luder* ‘the [n.] hussy’) (cf. Nübling/Lind 2021). An alternative application of neuter gender assignment can be found in hate speech, where it is employed discursively as a practice of denigration, often targeted at powerful women (e. g. *das Merkel* ‘the [n.] Merkel’). While it is predominantly women who are affected by this invective use of grammatical gender, nonbinary individuals seem to be similarly targeted in hateful social media comments. Lind/Nübling (2022a) record that up to 20% of a small sample of social media comments to posts about nonbinary experiences employ dehumanising neuter reference for nonbinary individuals.

This paper takes these tentative results as the basis for a larger investigation into dehumanising hate speech targeted at nonbinary and gender-nonconforming people in German social media, both in co-occurrence with grammatical “neutering” and beyond it. Analysing the comment sections of articles on a third legal gender option, gender-neutral language policies, and portrayals of gender transitions/coming-outs posted on the Facebook pages of major German newspapers and news magazines, this study aims to shed light on the linguistic practices employed in hateful discourse regarding nonbinary and gender-nonconforming individuals, and the role grammatical gender plays in this. Central in this investigation will be the question how the utilisation of neuter grammatical gender as a “dehumanizing grammatical metaphor” (Knoblock/Sazonova 2022) paves the way for other linguistic forms of dehumanisation and denigration. Dominant themes in hate speech towards nonbinary people will be explored and it will be suggested that the cognitive link between neuter grammatical gender and inanimate objects is used as a mental frame in the dehumanisation of nonbinary individuals, which positions those outside the gender binary as outside of the human sphere.

In the following, definitions and uses of the term hate speech will be discussed in order to establish the scope of the phenomenon (section 2). This section will be followed by a brief depiction of the social and legal recognition of nonbinary genders in Germany (section 3). Section 4 offers a description of the data base and methodology used in this study, and section 5 moves on to the presentation and discussion of its results. The paper concludes with a summary

of the findings and some propositions regarding their implications for the situation of nonbinary people in Germany.

2 Hate speech

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) broadly defines hate speech as “the advocacy, promotion or incitement of the denigration, hatred or vilification of a person or groups of persons, as well any harassment, insult, negative stereotyping, stigmatization or threat of such person or persons and any justification of all these forms of expression [...] based on a non-exhaustive list of personal characteristics or status that includes ‘race’, colour, language, religion or belief, nationality or national or ethnic origin, as well as descent, age, disability, sex, gender, gender identity and sexual orientation” (ECRI 2015: 16). In this definition, the key distinction between hate speech and other forms of insults, linguistic denigration, or pejorative speech stands central: hate speech bases any expressive form of discrimination, hatred, and aspersion on a person’s group membership, i. e. their belonging to a particular, often already disprivileged, social group. Thus, calling someone an “asshole” because they ignored one’s right of way in traffic is, though insulting, no hate speech, whereas a statement like “all Muslims are assholes”, even if uttered in the absence of any Muslims, is an example of hate speech. ElSherief et al. (2018) further distinguish between directed forms of hate speech that address one individual person who is attacked on the basis of their belonging to a specific social group, and generalised forms that are directed at groups of people.

While the compound *hate speech* might suggest otherwise, its realisation neither requires occurring in the form of speech nor does it need the person engaging in hate speech to actively feel hatred (cf. Meibauer 2013). Hate speech can occur in spoken or written utterances, in imagery, or even in gesture, facial expression or tone of voice (cf. Meibauer 2013: 1). And while hate speech can usually be traced back to feelings of intense opposition, dislike, and hatred, its function is not necessarily the individual expression of such emotions, its goal is rather, as Waldron writes, “to make these [hate speech] messages part of the permanent visible fabric of society” (Waldron 2012: 3). Hate speech can thus be understood as a linguistic and multimodal practice of denigration that targets people and groups of people based on – real or assumed – group memberships and belonging to social categories deemed undesirable and less-than, with the goal to shape this social group’s perception in wider society negatively.

Analyses of hate speech most often focus on acts of denigration based on race/ethnicity (cf. e. g. McGowan 2012; Matamoros-Fernández/Farkas 2021) or religious belonging of the targeted person or group (cf. e. g. Baumgarten et al. 2020; Warner/Hirschberg 2012), and racist and xenophobic hate speech usually stands front and centre in definitions of the term, as can be seen in the above definition. Work on gender-related hate speech is rarer and usually focuses on sexism in discourse (cf. e. g. Lillian 2007) and interaction (cf. e. g. Nielsen 2002), or addresses homophobic hate speech, which most often utilises derogatory terms from Christian contexts, e. g. *sodomites*, or dehumanising animal and vermin metaphors (cf. e. g. Mathias 2022; Reddy 2002). Besides broader investigations into the discursive representation of trans people in the press (e. g. Baker 2014; Zottola 2021), studies that specifically focus on hate speech targeted at transgender, nonbinary and – more broadly – gender-nonconforming individuals are few and far between and mostly quite recent (cf. Derecka 2019; Lind/Nübling

2022a; Ștefăniță/Buf 2021; Thál/Elmerot 2022). Derecka's (2019) study on the linguistics of transphobia in English and Polish online discussions emphasises that transphobia manifests in a variety of ways, ranging from misgendering through pronoun use or grammatical gender (in the case of Polish) to dehumanisation by lexically comparing trans people to objects or animals. Lind/Nübling (2022a) show for German that neuter gender is regularly utilised in hate speech directed at nonbinary people and at women who do not perform their gender in accordance with gender stereotypes, thus highlighting that grammatical gender can be a tool in the denigration of social outgroups. Thál/Elmerot (2022) illustrate cases of pronominal, adjectival, and verbal misgendering as practices to undermine the person's gender in Czech. Whereas these two studies focus on the forms and occurrence of hate speech towards trans and nonbinary people, the article by Ștefăniță/Buf (2021) addresses the impact of online abuse on members of the LGBTQ community, emphasising that hateful comments in social media can have severe impacts on the mental health of their targets.

The fact that there is very limited research on hate speech directed at nonbinary and gender-nonconforming people is certainly not motivated by this community's immunity to discrimination: transgender individuals are among the most targeted groups of hate crimes (cf. e. g. Walters et al. 2020). It is more likely that the representation of trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming individuals in mainstream media was too marginal before the "transgender tipping point" (cf. e. g. Konst 2018) to bring about awareness for harmful linguistic practices towards them, and that recognition of trans rights and of the perpetual attacks on this minority group has only recently increased to a degree where public attention is drawn to this issue. With more media stories on nonbinary and gender-nonconforming individuals and reports on issues related to gender as more complex than a strict binary being shared in social media, the possibilities of making denigrating and harmful comments that are visible to large audiences have grown exponentially. With this development, patterns and formations in hate speech directed at nonbinary and gender-nonconforming people become more visible and can thus be analysed as it is done in this paper.

While linguistic analysis of hate speech most often focuses on the use of metaphors, threats, and insults on a lexical or syntactic level, hateful speech can also occur on a much more subtle level, i. e. in grammar. The edited volume *Grammar of Hate* (Knoblock 2022) addresses this lesser-known form of hate speech that utilises grammatical forms and their – often highly abstract – meaning in the linguistic denigration of others. An example for this is the subject of this paper: the utilisation of the abstract semantics of grammatical gender in denigrating discourse. Pragmatic effects and social functions of shifts and reversals in the assignment of grammatical gender have been studied previously (e. g. Busley/Nübling 2021; Steriopolo 2021), although rarely (cf. Lind/Nübling 2022a) specifically in the context of hate speech. In the following, the sociolinguistic re-functionalisation of the grammatical gender system in German will be discussed and it will be shown that the assignment of neuter grammatical gender to human referents serves a devaluating purpose and is particularly prominent in hateful comments directed at nonbinary and gender-nonconforming people as a means to construct their positioning outside the gender binary as an outside of humankind and often co-occurs with lexical forms of dehumanisation.

3 Nonbinary gender in Germany

Even though we know that the two-gender model only arose in the 18th century in Western societies (cf. Laqueur 1992), that many societies know more than two genders (cf. e. g. Thorne et al. 2019), and that intersex people **do** exist (cf. e. g. Jones 2018; Monro et al. 2021), the belief that gender is, has been, and always will be a binary order of male and female is impressively pervasive. Nevertheless, awareness for the existence of nonbinary genders is growing, together with an increasing legal recognition (cf. e. g. Liszewski et al. 2018).¹ In public discourse, the terms *nonbinary* and *intersex* are often confused or used interchangeably, even though they usually refer to two different phenomena: *nonbinary* means to identify one's gender outside the binary of male and female. Most often, nonbinary people are endosex as opposed to intersex, i. e. they are born with sex characteristics that fit within the medical norms for “female” or “male” bodies. *Intersex* refers to a range of physiological sex characteristics that do not fully conform to the medical norms for “female” or “male” bodies. While intersex people might identify as nonbinary and do so more often than endosex individuals, they predominantly identify as men or women (cf. Monro 2019).

The debate and legal dispute over a third gender option in Germany was largely a fight for the recognition of intersex rights, fought by intersex people. The German Federal Constitutional Court ruled in favour of a third legal gender category on October 10, 2017, obligating the German State to introduce such a category within the personal statute law (cf. BVerfG 2017). At the end of 2018, the third gender category “diverse” became the official alternative to the existing categories “male” and “female”, and the option to leave out the gender entry for intersex children. While this change in legislation was fought for by intersex activists and even though the government has made explicit that it should only apply to people with medical intersex conditions, it is also used by endosex nonbinary people to change their legal gender to diverse, and in public discourse the new legislation seems to be largely understood as serving nonbinary identified individuals no matter whether intersex or endosex. This perception ties in with the heated debate around gender-fair language (cf. e. g. Lind/Nübling 2022b) and trans right, issues that are all constructed by the Alt Right as part of a general “gender craze” (Lobin 2021). With the introduction of the so-called *Selbstbestimmungsgesetz* (‘self-determination law’) in 2024, the legal category “diverse” is now officially available to anyone identifying outside the binary of male and female gender. Time will have to tell whether this right to gender self-determination will be upheld under a more conservative government; the CDU, who received most votes during the election and will therefore most likely lead the new government, targeted this exact legislation in their electoral campaign.

4 Data base and methodology

The analysis in this paper is based on social media comments made to 18 posts by major German newspapers and news magazines posted on their publically accessible Facebook pages. Chosen for the analysis were the Facebook pages of newspapers and news magazines that are traditionally classified as *Leitmedien*, i. e. newspapers of record, two from the politically

¹ Recent developments in countries such as the US show how vulnerable the legal recognition of trans and nonbinary identities is to reactionary policies in a political climate that increasingly turns against minority rights.

conservative spectrum and four from the more liberal/progressive spectrum. Three posts per page were chosen based on page-specific searches for the terms *nichtbinär/nicht-binär* ‘nonbinary’, *geschlechtsneutral/genderneutral* ‘gender neutral’, *drittes Geschlecht/dritte Option* ‘third gender/third option’, and *trans/transgender*. The sample contains posts made between the decision to introduce a third legal gender in Germany in late 2017 and 2021. Including the search term *trans/transgender* is of course slightly problematic as it is predominantly used for binary trans people, i. e. trans men and trans women. It was found, though, that using this search term also led to articles on people who are seen as outside the binary gender norm by readers, e. g. trans masculine individuals and trans feminine persons who do not comply with heteronormative expectations towards the respective gender. The actual topics covered in the articles ranged from the German Federal Court’s decision to create a third positive legal gender category in 2017 to companies changing forms of address to gender neutral phrasings and to individual coming-out and transition stories.

About 5000 publically available top-level comments (i.e. comments made directly to the post, not the responses to them) were collected, displayed when “Show all comments, including potential spam” was selected. The text of every comment, without any identifying information (e. g. user name of the poster), was manually copied into an Excel sheet and coded for evaluative stance towards the post’s subject based on content (positive, negative, neutral, unclear): comments congratulating people on their coming-out, stating support for LGBTQ people, or mentioning that everyone should have the right to be happy were coded as positive stances towards the topic. The code “negative stance” was given to comments that were pejorative, hostile, or insulting towards the person/group of people the article focused on (e. g. comments calling nonbinary or trans people sick or mentally ill) as well as comments that misgendered individuals, used emojis or gifs that express a negative attitude (e. g. the vomit or facepalm emoji), or made statements about the irrelevance of the topic. Neutral comments were predominantly those that linked other users in the comment section, made inquiries regarding what forms of address should be used for nonbinary people (without further evaluation), or commented on the commenting behaviour of others. The category “unclear” contains a variety of types of comments: incomplete comments (e. g. a single letter), comments in foreign languages, comments that showed no obvious connection to the topic of the article (e. g. “Wo bleibt der verdammte Bus????” [‘Where is the damn bus????’]²), and comments where the position of the person commenting seemed mixed or was difficult to interpret (e. g. questions which toilet a nonbinary person should use, which could be genuine questions or express a certain stance towards in which spaces nonbinary people should be allowed). The coding process followed some principles from grounded theory approaches (cf. e. g. Mey/Mruck 2011; Breuer/ Muckel/ Dieris 2019) in that all coding was done data-driven, i. e. the codes were not established prior to the coding but developed from the data material. The negative comments were then coded for their thematic content or focus. It is important to point out that only one thematic code per comment was given; in longer comments that might be fitting for several codes, the one code was chosen that was deemed as being most central to the comment. Most of these content codes were quite obvious and straight forward (e. g. a comment like “schizophren also” [‘so,

² Possibly related to the “trans bus” meme, but unclear.

schizophrenic’] was coded as “mentally ill”, comments on the irrelevance of the topic got the code “irrelevant”, and comments claiming that there are only two genders or referring to genitals were coded as “biology”). Comments treating nonbinary and gender-nonconforming people as objects or animals or use those as points of comparison were coded as “dehumanisation”. Other comments were more convoluted. This was particularly true for what ended up as the code “Literatur/Film”: while comments that mentioned Stephen King by name or referred directly to the book *It* (e. g. “Es gibt ein schönes Buch von Stephen King über dieses Phänomen: *ES*” [‘There is a nice book by Stephen King about this phenomenon: IT’]), others that indirectly referred to *The Silence of the Lambs* were more difficult to trace, e. g. “es soll sich die Haut mit Lotion einreiben” [‘It shall rub the lotion on its skin’], which refers to a phrase said by the serial killer Jame Gumb/Bufalo Bill to his victims in the novel/film *Silence of the Lambs*. In addition to thematic codes that were primarily based on semantics, the grammatical code “neuter gender” was used in order to trace the discursive-evaluative function of this form of reference.

5 Analysis

Given the ubiquity of hate speech and negativity in social media comments (e. g. Guiora/Park 2017; Mathew et al. 2019), it is unsurprising that the majority of the comments analysed for this study is negative: in total, about 64% of all comments were classified as negative, varying greatly between specific posts rather than showing a clear picture in accordance to political leanings of the respective newspaper or magazine. It seems that the amount of negativity poured into comment sections varies considerably based on topic, teaser text, and image. Particularly negative are the comment sections of articles on gender-fair language (averaging 78.9% negative comments) and those with teaser texts and/or images that are particularly queer in the sense of breaking binary gender norms or present nonbinary coming-outs of private individuals (66,0%). The lowest ratio of negative comments appears in the comment sections of posts regarding the Federal Constitutional Court’s ruling in favour of a third gender and the subsequent implementation of this decision by the government (48.5% negative). It might thus be tentatively suggested that negative comments seem particularly ubiquitous when gender-neutral language is discussed (which is unsurprising given the heated public debate around this topic, see e. g. Ivanov 2022, Kasper 2022) and when the teasers appearing in users’ Facebook feeds are particular at odds with a clear-cut gender binary and go against stereotypes of femininity and masculinity.

In the following, the analysis will primarily focus on comments coded as negative that use neuter grammatical gender in reference to people and/or display lexical forms of dehumanisation. Neuter gender reference will also be traced in comments coded as neutral or unclear as not all instances of such gender use are negative.³ Also other negative comments that do not employ neuter gender reference will be discussed to show denigrating linguistic patterns that extend beyond the semantics of neuter grammatical gender.

³ No neuter gender reference was found in unambiguously positive comments.

In total, 242 instances of unprompted neuter gender reference to nonbinary and gender-nonconforming people were found.⁴ In relative terms, this means that about 5% of all comments analysed in this study use neuter grammatical reference to humans. We are thus dealing with a relatively low-frequent, yet not insignificant phenomenon. It is noteworthy that every single comment section included in the sample had at least one occurrence of neuter gender reference even though this was not a criterion for inclusion. In the following, a more detailed analysis of those comments making use of neuter gender reference is provided to illuminate its discursive functions.

Despite the overall low frequency of grammatical neuter in person reference, its occurrence spikes in the comment sections of some few articles. The highest relative occurrence of neuter gender references is found in comments on nonbinary people who are visually or textually displayed as queer and/or not fitting into binary gender stereotypes. Two comment sections of such posts stand out with respectively almost a quarter of all negative comments and almost 13% of all negative comments making use of neuter grammatical gender.

The evaluation of the discursive function of neuter gender reference is in many cases difficult when there is no further context: are comments like “der, die, das, was?” (‘the[m.], the[f.], the[n.], what?’) or “Er, Sie, Es?” (‘He, She, It?’) negatively evaluating or should they be understood as largely neutral questions regarding the use of definite articles and personal pronouns for nonbinary people? When in doubt, such comments as well as questions such as “Was soll das dann für eine Anrede sein? Es?” (‘What form of address would that be then? It?’) were annotated as unclear or neutral. Of all neuter gender references, about 35% occurred in such comments classified as neutral or unclear. While in some instances questions and statements referring to the grammatical three-gender system in German appear genuinely curious, it is evident that there is an overall understanding of neuter gender reference as having a dehumanising effect and as being usually reserved for inanimate objects:

- (1) „Wie soll die Person angesprochen werden? Als es? Also eine Sache?“⁵
‘How should the person then be addressed? As it? I. e., as a thing?’
- (2) „Mich würde da mal die Anrede interessieren. Wäre dann ja ein Neutrum bzw. gegenständlich“
‘I would be interested in the form of address. It would then have to be neuter, i. e. as an object’

The majority (almost 65%) of neuter reference to nonbinary and gender-nonconforming people occurs in a negative evaluative context. When neuter reference is combined with emojis or written expressions of laughter, it is evident that the commenter is aware of the dehumanising connotation of neuter gender pronouns and utilises this knowledge to mock gender identities outside the traditional binary:

- (3) „Da wo es sich eher wohlfühlt *harharhar*“
‘Where it feels more comfortable *harharhar*’
- (4) „Also Es 😏😏😏😏 oder das 🤪🤪“
‘So It 😏😏😏😏 or the[n.] 🤪🤪’

⁴ Unprompted here means the use of neuter gender articles and pronouns not evoked by a neuter noun of personal reference like *das Mädchen* ‘the [n.] girl’, *das Kind* ‘the [n.] child’. With such nouns, anaphoric use of neuter pronouns is largely unmarked.

⁵ Spelling was not changed from the original comments.

Three thematic areas dominate comments that make use of neuter gender reference: language/forms of address/pronoun choice (26%), dehumanisation (25.6%), and irrelevance of the topic (17.8%).

This third most common theme that co-occurs with neuter gender reference is commenting that topics such as nonbinary people, third gender options, and gender-neutral language are irrelevant (see examples (5) and (6)).

- (5) „Dann richtet ihr/ihm oder was es nun sein oder nicht sein möchte, dass mich das einen Scheiss interessiert“
 ‘Then tell her/him or whatever it wants or doesn’t want to be that I don’t give a damn’
- (6) „Jeder kann sein was er/sie/es/käsekuchen sein will. Man sollte es nur nicht den andern aufdrücken und damit nerven“
 ‘everyone can be what he/she/it/cheesecake wants to be. Just don’t impose it on others and annoy them with it’

Also beyond the use of neuter gender reference, comments remarking on the irrelevance of the topic are very common, often pointing out that politics should care about more important things or that Germany has more pressing issues to deal with. Those are overall the most frequent types of comments in this data sample. Related to notions of irrelevance, but less frequent, is the code “attention-seeking”, which was given to comments that suggest that coming-outs or identifying as nonbinary are only for being the centre of attention or because it is a trend (see example (7)). These types of comments are also often made outside of neuter gender reference (example (8)). Commenters seem to assume that self-importance must be the central motivation for giving media interviews, and it appears that there is little understanding for users’ own commenting behaviour contributing to Facebook’s algorithms pushing similar posts into their timelines.

- (7) „Hää! das hat vielleicht Probleme, kann es die für sich behalten.. oder braucht etwas etwa Aufmerksamkeit“
 ‘Eh! It has problems, can’t it keep them to itself...or does something need attention?’
- (8) „Keinen interessiert es aber die erfundenen ‚Transmenschen‘ möchten ja immer gerne im Mittelpunkt stehen“
 ‘No one cares but the invented ‘trans people’ always want to be the centre of attention’

The most frequent code in comments using neuter gender reference is the one for language/forms of address. Among the comments that make inquiries or statements about using grammatical neuter forms of reference and address, most were classified as neutral or unclear (75.9%), which illustrates both that there is a lot of uncertainty around how people outside of binary gender norms should be addressed and that it can be difficult to evaluate the stance in very short comments such as H”allo Es. Vielleicht so?” (‘Hello It. Maybe like this?’) that seems to offer a possible form of address. Additionally to these comments generally concerning forms of reference or address, another nine comments suggest using pronoun forms from dialects, where neuter reference is unmarked – even though this is only true for (young) women a speaker is familiar with/close to (cf. Busley/Nübling 2021), which the commenters don’t notice. All except one (which declares gender-neutral language to be *plem plem* ‘crazy’ and was therefore coded as negative) were classified as neutral, e. g.:

- (9) „Rheinländer würden sagen ‚et‘“
 ‘Rhinelanders would say “et” [dialect form of the neuter pronoun es ‘it’]’

Most common though is neuter gender reference in comments that were classified as dehumanising. This is a relatively broad category that covers comments where the neuter gender pronoun is in itself a marker of nonhumanness (examples (10) and (11) as well as comments explicitly referring to nonbinary and gender-nonconforming people as things or objects (examples (12) and (13)).

- (10) „Ein klassisches ‘ES’!!!“
 ‘a classic “IT”!!!’
- (11) „Aus einem hübschen Mädels wird ein es“
 ‘A pretty girl turns into an it’
- (12) „es ist ein Ding“
 ‘it is a thing’
- (13) „alles andere kann man ‘Ding’ nennen“
 ‘everything else can be called a thing’

This frame associating nonbinary and gender-nonconforming people with things, which falls under what Haslam (2006) calls “mechanistic dehumanization” and that denies people or groups central aspects of human nature, is the most common type of dehumanisation found in the data. This might be due to the general semantic connotations of neuter grammatical gender as largely being reserved for inanimate objects (cf. Köpcke/Zubin 1996; Lind/Nübling 2022a) but is clearly used as a discursive tool of denigration towards the individuals referred to in this way. Furthermore, the dehumanisation category includes comparisons to animals (see example (14)), to aliens as in (15) or to cyborgs as in (16), although these are less common than treating nonbinary and gender-nonconforming people as things or comparing them to objects and sometimes occur together with objectification as in (14)..

- (14) „es gibt halt nur entweder/oder [i.e. male and female – ML] alles andere ist halt nen ‘es’ also ein Ding oder ein Tier“
 ‘there is only either/or everything else is an “it”, that is a thing or an animal’
- (15) „Das Xenomorph hat echt wahnsinnige Probleme“
 ‘the [n.] xenomorph really has insane problems’
- (16) „Oder ist er ein Cyborg? Dann ist es ein Es“
 ‘Or is he a cyborg? Then it is an It’

These lexical forms of othering do not only occur in direct proximity to neuter grammatical gender but also outside of it, illustrating that the link between nonhumanness and nonbinary genders, gender neutrality, or gender-nonconformity extends beyond the semantics of the grammatical three-gender system. Repeatedly, connections are made between being outside the gender binary and being nonhuman, i.e. objects, animals, aliens, fantasy creatures such as kobolds or elves, or other beings (e. g. using the noun (*Lebe-*)*Wesen* ‘being [n.]’ that refers to all animate beings). Figure 1. summarises these different forms of dehumanisation.

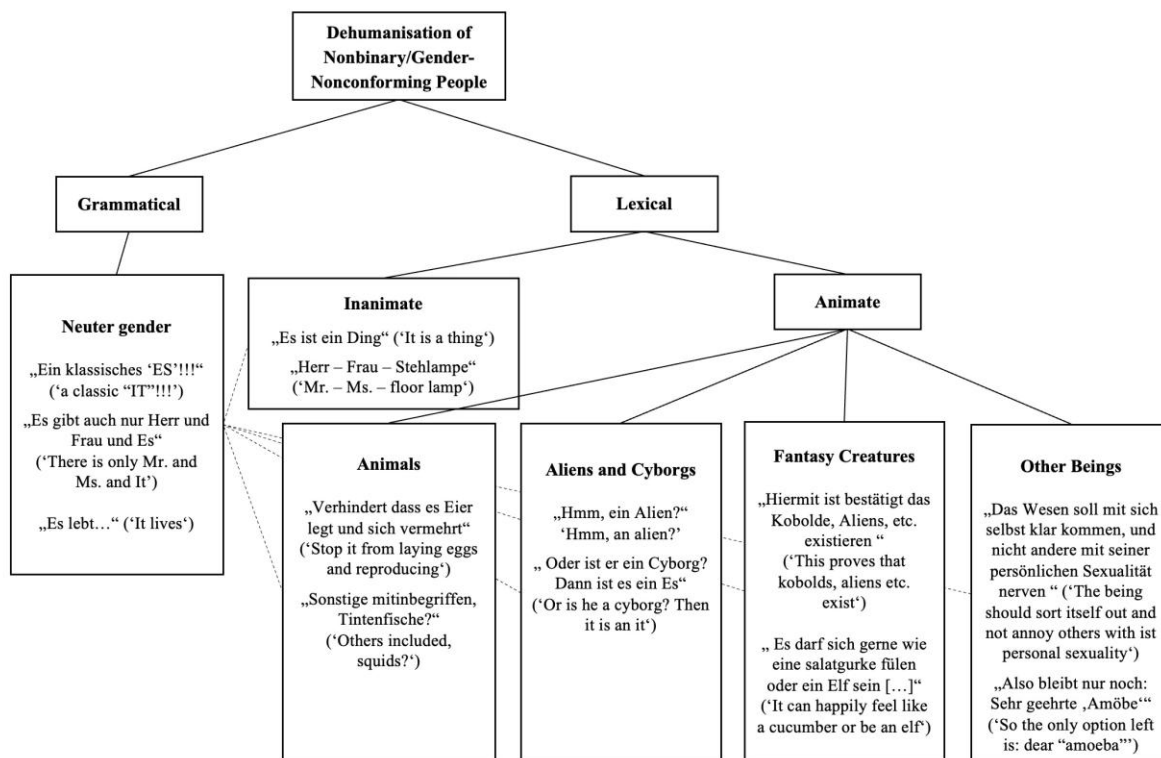


Figure 1: Forms of grammatical and lexical dehumanisation of nonbinary and gender-nonconforming people (dotted lines show connection between neuter gender and lexical forms of dehumanisation)⁶

In addition to these cases of dehumanisation, there are also other forms of denigration in the comments, e. g. suggesting that nonbinary people are “crazy” or mentally ill (examples (17) and (18)). These are also highly frequent in negative comments beyond neuter gender reference (see (19)). This link between nonbinary genders and gender-nonconformity with mental illness and need for psychiatric treatment often goes together with the reference to biological sex characteristics such as genitals, as in examples (18) and (19). References to biology and physical sex markers are most often used to express that there are only two genders/sexes which are clearly distinguishable, illustrating a rather basic understanding of the intricacies of biological sex characteristics (examples (20) and (21)). The role of social construction in gender is largely rejected, leading to the conclusion that anyone who is nonbinary or gender-nonconforming despite being endosex must be mentally ill, thus connecting this frame with the simplistic frames of biological sex and gender binarity.

(17) „Es hat halt eine Meise“
‘it has a screw loose’

(18) „Allerdings muss es auch akzeptieren, dass es Männer mit penis und Frauen mit vulva gibt und uns nicht seine psychische Störung aufdrängen“
‘It has to accept that there are men with penisses and women with vulvas and don’t impose on us with its mental illness’

⁶ Many comments show multiple forms of dehumanisation as they use more than one comparison and could therefore be placed in multiple of the boxes in this figure, e. g. *Kobolde, Aliens etc.* or *sich wie eine salatgurke fühlen oder ein Elf sein*.

- (19) „Man hat entweder einen Penis oder eine Vagina, was anderes gibt's nicht! Ihr seid krank“
 'One either has a penis or a vagina, there is nothing else! You are sick'
- (20) „Trotzdem hat ,es‘ männliche Chromosomen“
 'Nevertheless, it has male chromosomes'
- (21) „Hat es einen P*nis, ist es männlich. Hat es eine M*schi, ist es weiblich. Ende“
 'If it has a p*nis, it's male. If it has a p*ssy, it's female. Period'

Commenters also combine the use of neuter grammatical gender with denying nonbinary people agency in their labelling and the terms and forms of address other people use for them, which further adds to their construction as being less than human by rejecting their linguistic rights to selfhood (examples (22) and (23)).

- (22) „Was es will, ist mir völlig egal!“
 'I don't care what it wants'
- (23) „Es hat nicht nur für sich entschieden, wie es angesprochen werden möchte. Es hat auch zu respektieren, wie es von von anderen angesprochen wird. Es hat sich dabei nicht als Ende jedweder Schöpfung über andere zu stellen. Es muß noch Respekt lernen.“
 'It has not only decided for itself how it wants to be addressed. It also has to respect how it is addressed by others. It can't put itself above others as the crown of creation. It has to learn respect'

Particularly disturbing are – overall infrequent but nevertheless noteworthy – comments that make a link between nonbinary people and the evil antagonists of horror films/novels, either using the neuter pronoun *es* 'it' as a metaphorical bridge to liken nonbinary people to the title character/terrorising predator in Stephen King's 1986-novel *It* or referring to a well-known line from *The Silence of the Lambs* that is used by the serial killer Jame Gumb/Bufalo Bill during the torture and subsequent killing of his victims (e. g. "Es soll sich die Haut mit Lotion einreiben" ['It shall rub its skin with lotion']). This discursive proximity of nonbinary and gender-nonconforming people to serial killers and murderous creatures constructs them as either potential threats or welcome victims of violent acts, thus creating a cognitive frame that brings together gender-queerness with being danger and threat.

We also find general insults and expressions of disgust or even suggestions of violence towards them (as in (24) and (25)), though these are overall rare. Furthermore, the data shows some few instances of neuter gender reference to former chancellor Angela Merkel – a discursive practice that is overall quite frequent in negative comments about her (Nübling 2014) – as well as neuter gender assignment to nouns that normally have masculine or feminine grammatical gender, probably to express that gender-neutral language – which seems to be often understood as synonymous with grammatical neuter – is silly, e. g. *das Passagier* 'the[n.] passenger [masculine noun in German]', or *das Fluggast* 'the[n.] airline passenger [masculine noun in German]'.

- (24) „Der Mann Die Frau Das... pfui Teufel“
 'The[m.] man The[f.] woman The[n.].. yikes'
- (25) „am besten mit ES und es wird wie Tiere auch wie ein sachgegenstand im Gesetz behandelt weil wer nicht männlich und nicht weiblich ist ist Ein ES... heißt ne Schelle geben ist ne Sachbeschädigung ...“
 'best use IT and it should be treated like animals in law, as a thing. I.E. if you slap it it's property damage'

An interesting turn manifests in comments that suggest visible markers for people who do not conform to the gender binary. This can be expressed relatively mildly as in (26), but culminates in a comment suggesting that “it” – a nonbinary person – should have the letter *d* for ‘diverse’ tattooed on their forehead (example (27)). This invokes troubling comparisons to enforced tattoos used to mark the subaltern, ranging from slaves in ancient Rome (cf. Gustafson 2017) to those incarcerated in the concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau (cf. Därmann 2017), a similarity that is even noted in example (28).

- (26) „Dann muss er/sie/es sich halt in der Öffentlichkeit ein Schild um den Hals hängen mit der Information, wie er/sie/es gerne hätte“
 ‘Then he/she/it should carry a sign around the neck in public with the information how he/she/it would like it [the form of address – ML]’
- (27) „Aber nur wenn ,es‘ auf der Stirn ein ,D‘ tätowiert hat“
 ‘But only if "it" has a “D” tattooed to the forehead’
- (28) „Dann sollte man solche geschlechtsneutralen Menschen aber Kennzeichen, woher weiß ich sonst das es weder Herr noch Frau ist? Nur eine Kennzeichnung gab es in Deutschland schon mal, und das kann man doch nun wirklich nicht mehr wollen.“
 ‘Then we should mark gender-neutral people, how should I know otherwise that it is not Mr. nor Ms.? But we had such marking before in Germany and you can not really want to have that anymore’

Overall, the analysis shows the diverse nature of comments directed at or made about nonbinary and gender-nonconforming people. While some of them express curiosity and an interest in understanding how best to address or talk about people who do not fit into the gender binary in a gendered language, the majority of the comments are negative, denigrating, or even downright hateful. This is particularly true for comments using neuter gender reference. The assignment of neuter gender pronouns and articles oftentimes goes hand in hand with othering language use beyond grammatical gender and it paves the way for the metaphorical dehumanisation of human beings as things, animals, or aliens. Someone who does not comply with the binary order of gender is not deemed to be part of the human sphere. Binary gender is, it seems, so much at the core of what it means to be human that rejecting this cultural order translates to being removed from human society altogether and positioned as the subhuman other.

6 Conclusion

In the Facebook comments analysed in this paper, being neither man nor woman – or performing gender differently as a binary trans person – is regularly constructed as being nonhuman. The use of neuter grammatical gender in pronouns and articles is, as Knoblock/Sazonova (2022) have pointed out, indeed a “dehumanizing grammatical metaphor”, and it builds a bridge for further dehumanising metaphors that place nonbinary and gender-nonconforming people among animals, aliens, and objects. According to Waldron (2012), hate speech aims to change the fabric of society and to establish harmful, denigrating mental frames of the targeted group in the public consciousness. This is indeed what happens in these comment sections: a mental bridge is established between nonbinary and gender-nonconforming people and nonhumanness, because according to these comments, human beings can only be either male or female. Someone who is neither male or female, these commenters suggest, cannot be part of humankind, which is marked through neuter gender assignment and lexical dehumanisation. This discour-

sively produced nonhumanness is not constructed as a mere neutral other but clearly positioned hierarchically as subhuman; someone who is neither a “real man” or a “real woman” is less than a human, has less agency and rights, and is linked with negative mental frames. Through this, an overall derogatory image of gender-nonconformity is created, and by repeating the same images throughout social media, this image solidifies. It is therefore particularly problematic that so many official, professionally managed Facebook pages do not moderate their comment sections, allowing these negative, often highly offensive perspectives on nonbinary and gender-nonconforming people to linger on and contribute to the overall societal imagery of gender-queerness.

To end on a more positive note, though, it should be pointed out that these comments do not stand unchallenged. Other commenters do use comment sections to educate and express support for queer people and stand up for equality, e. g. through the use of the hashtag #ichbinhier (cf. Buerger 2021 for a similar initiative in Swedish social media). People responding to hateful comments point out their offensive nature, clarify and provide information and argue for more respect, tolerance, and acceptance. Hate speech, even though ubiquitous in the digital age, is met with counterspeech (cf. e. g. Zollner 2024), and through that online communities stand up for targeted minority groups and demonstrate social responsibility. It can thus be hoped that the pejorative frames installed through hate speech can be changed towards a more inclusive and diverse perspective on society.

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