

Between visibility and neutralisation: inclusive language in job advertisements of German-speaking Swiss universities

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Abstract

This article examines language inclusivity in academic job advertisements of German-speaking Swiss universities. The research illuminates the progressive shift toward gender equity in academic recruitment while underscoring the complex linguistic and administrative challenges of standardizing institutional communication, highlighting possible inconsistencies between the university, cantonal and national levels. Analysing a dedicated corpus of vacancy notices, the paper evaluates how institutional gender-sensitive language guidelines are implemented in practice. After a description of the structure and main features of such guidelines and of the text type considered, the analysis categorizes inclusive approaches into visibility strategies (primarily full splitting and synthetic forms based on neographies) and neutralisation strategies (including collective nouns, epicenes, passive constructions, and nominalised participles). The empirical findings reveal that despite a strong institutional commitment to non-discriminatory communication, the generic masculine form partially persists, causing sometimes internal stylistic inconsistencies within the text genre. To resolve these compliance gaps, the study explores practical text-rewriting methodologies utilizing digital lexicographical resources like the *Genderwörterbuch*.

1 Introduction

The focus on gender-sensitive language is now a well-established practice in many contexts and, with regard to the German-speaking world, has a tradition stretching back several decades. As early as the mid-1970s, the issue of language and gender became a central focus of the women's movement in the Federal Republic of Germany (cf. Eichhoff-Cyrus 2004: 196). From then on, this has led to a gradual evolution and change in linguistic usage, which now has an impact on the daily lives of the community of speakers. In the university sector, in particular, there is a marked sensitivity to the issue: on the one hand, because the academic context has often been a hotbed of progress and innovation, including in terms of linguistic expression; on the other hand, because the younger generations of university students and staff appear to be very interested in and engaged with these issues. This is partially due to the fact that younger people have been more exposed to gender-sensitive language, starting from scholastic education (cf. Schwarz et al. 2026: 68). Over time, the various German-speaking universities have thus developed guidelines designed to gradually regulate and/or standardise linguistic inclusivity across the most diverse areas of academic life – ranging from the way lecturers and students

address one another, through internal regulations and official communications, to websites and educational materials and scientific publications (cf. Beaufaÿs/Hermann/Kortendiek 2022: 14).

It was against this backdrop, and in recognition of the growing need to standardise and, in some cases, simplify academic texts also through the use of innovative technologies, that the project called “HCAI4GEND – Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence for Gender Sensitive Linguistic Simplification in German, English and Italian Institutional Communication” was carried out (cf. Università degli Studi di Milano (‘University of Milan’)). This was a multidisciplinary research initiative conducted by a consortium of Italian universities (including the University of Milan, the University of Bologna, the University of Trieste and the University of Salerno)¹ and funded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research (MUR) as a PRIN 2022 project. The study focused on five types of institutional texts: statutes, regulations, forms, job advertisements and contracts. These are types of legal and regulatory texts that are very common in university communications and are therefore relevant to the research. Specifically, the author of this paper contributed within the Milan-based research unit to the rewriting of German-language text sections that did not comply with gender-sensitive language guidelines, employing various strategies whilst taking into account the importance of preserving the legal validity of the modified terms. This article will concentrate on the analysis of one of the text types considered, namely job advertisements for teaching and research staff, limiting the scope of the investigation to German-speaking Swiss universities.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section focuses on analysing the key features of the guidelines on gender-sensitive language developed by various universities, highlighting, amongst other things, potential inconsistencies with relevant national and cantonal regulations. The second section describes the corpus of German-language texts and the main characteristics of the job advertisement text genre. The third part includes an examination of the prevailing strategies of visibility and neutralisation, with numerous examples of their application. The final part addresses the issue of the partial persistence of the generic masculine form and the possibilities for rewriting sections of text that do not comply with the guidelines.

2 Gender-sensitive language in German-speaking Swiss universities

The Swiss higher education landscape is broad and diverse: there are 57 Swiss higher education institutions accredited in accordance with the Higher Education Act (HEdA).² These include universities, universities of applied sciences, universities of teacher education and other institutions within the higher education sector (cf. *swissuniversities*, the umbrella organisation of the Swiss academic institutions). For the purposes of this study, we will limit our consideration to institutions where German is used as the language of study and work; Italian- and French-speaking institutions will therefore be excluded. It is interesting to note that almost all the institutions considered have, over time, developed internal instructions to describe and regulate the non-discriminatory use of language. The titles of these documents, which can be consulted

¹ For further information on the promotion of inclusive language through artificial intelligence, see the essay published in this same journal by the researchers from the Salerno research unit (cf. Vellutino/Ingenito/Vitiello 2026).

² This is the Federal Act on Funding and Coordination of the Swiss Higher Education Sector, adopted in 2011 and in force since 2015 (cf. Fedlex).

on the websites of the respective universities, primarily contain the keywords *Leitfaden* (‘guide-line’) and *Empfehlungen* (‘recommendations’): this suggests that such documents tend not to be overly binding. In most cases, staff and students are simply urged to take the linguistic strategies into account and apply them, but it is unclear whether sanctions are imposed in the event of non-compliance (cf. Siegenthaler 2021: 82). Below, we will examine how these vademecums are structured and what they contain.

In general, Swiss German-speaking universities have a web page which is dedicated to gender-sensitive language: usually you can find a text describing the importance of this theme in the academic context accompanied by one or more guidelines in pdf format.³ The length of such documents is variable: it can range from a couple of pages up to more than forty, sometimes with versions in other languages (above all French and English) and/or a condensed, schematic version for quick reference. As Elmiger explains in a recent essay on inclusive language,

[...] guidelines for non-sexist/inclusive language are far from homogeneous, both in terms of content and format. They vary significantly in format, ranging from single-page recommendations to comprehensive books covering a wide range of topics. These documents may address one language or multiple languages, particularly in bilingual regions or institutions, such as universities that operate in both a local language and English.

(Elmiger 2026: 16)

Generally speaking, after a presentation of the key principles and intentions of the guidelines, among which you often find inclusion, freedom, comprehensibility, and uniformity, there is a description of the various visibility and neutralisation strategies that can be applied in order to communicate in a non-discriminatory way. All of them share one common goal: avoiding the use of the generic masculine, with a view to ensuring equality between men and women and, where possible, to taking non-binary identities into account.⁴ In some cases, there are also examples of acceptable and non-acceptable formulations, as we can see in the figure below taken from the guidelines of the Zürcher Hochschule für Angewandte Wissenschaften – ZHAW (‘Zurich University of Applied Sciences’).

³ Quite often guidelines are structured in such a way that they first introduce the topic of gender-sensitive language from a theoretical perspective (thereby emphasising the role of language as a key tool for change and the role of universities in creating a respectful study and working environment) and then, in a second step, describe the language strategies in detail (cf. Crestani 2025: 126).

⁴ These texts therefore serve an informative, “moralising” and appeal-making function within the academic community (cf. ibd.: 147).

Beispiele: Genderneutrale und inklusive Personenbezeichnungen

Ansatz	😊	😞
Genderneutrale Formen	die Studierenden	-
	die Dozierenden	-
	die Fachkräfte	-
	die Lehrpersonen	-
Inklusive Kurzformen	Kolleg:innen	-
	Expert:innen	-
	Professor:innen	-
Pronomen	Alle Alle sind froh, das Prüfungsergebnis rasch zu kennen.	Jedermann, jede und jeder Jeder ist froh, das Prüfungsergebnis rasch zu kennen.
	Niemand Niemand kennt die neue Verordnung.	keine und keiner Keiner kennt die neue Verordnung.
	Mael ist eine nonbinäre Person und studiert an der ZHAW. Mael ist eine nonbinäre Person. Mael/They/Sier studiert an der ZHAW.	Mael ist eine nonbinäre Person. Er oder Sie studiert an der ZHAW.

Figure 1: Extract from a table showing examples of desirable (left column) and non-acceptable terms and formulations (right column) for everyday written and spoken communication in an academic setting (ZHAW)

Distinctions are sometimes drawn between different text types and communicative situations, as the approaches and strategies suggested are not always equally applicable in every circumstance. In some cases, the documents also focus on the non-discriminatory use of images: the guidelines of the University of Lucerne, for example, refer to both linguistic and visual aspects right from the title,⁵ and then encourage users to depict well-balanced, diverse groups, to include under-represented individuals, to distribute men and women evenly across the foreground, centre and periphery, and to avoid or challenge stereotypes, so to help to convey the institution's openness, inclusivity, and flexibility (cf. ZHAW: 23–33).

In the case of one institution, the Pädagogische Hochschule der Fachhochschule Nordwestschweiz ('FHNW School of Education'), there is even an exercise designed to test users' understanding of the guidelines and their ability to apply them. The task requires to rewrite a few example sentences in a gender-sensitive manner; the text passages are all taken from academic publications and have been adapted for the exercise. At the end, suggested answers are also provided.

More commonly, web pages or guidelines contain references to other sources or resources on gender-sensitive language. In the case of Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich (ETH Zürich) ('Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich'), for example, reference is made to language guidelines from other Swiss universities, to gender dictionaries (*Geschickt gendersn*⁶,

⁵ The document is called *Sprache & Bild. Ein Leitfaden zur Gleichbehandlung aller Geschlechter* ('Language & images: a guide to Equal treatment of all genders'); Universität Luzern, Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaftliche Fakultät.

⁶ The capabilities and features of this tool will be described and utilised later in the article.

Gender app, *Gender Glossar*⁷) and to federal guidelines. This last point is particularly interesting because there may be discrepancies between the guidelines issued by universities and those issued by administrative authorities at national and/or cantonal level. Let us consider, for example, what happens in the case of the guidelines of the Universität Basel (‘University of Basel’). On the one hand, the cantonal and national provisions regarding the use of inclusive language in regulatory texts are accepted and shared:

In Bezug auf juristisch relevante, rechtsetzende Texte (Ordnungen, Reglemente, Weisungen) orientiert sich die Universität Basel an den Vorgaben des Kantons Basel-Stadt bzw. den Leitlinien der Bundeskanzlei. Da Rechtssicherheit und Eindeutigkeit in diesen Texten entscheidend sind, werden anstelle des generischen Maskulinums durchgehend Paarformen oder neutrale Formen verwendet. Nicht-binäre Geschlechtsidentitäten werden nicht explizit genannt, aber implizit berücksichtigt, da sich reglementarische und andere offizielle Texte der Universität per se an alle Universitätsangehörigen richten.

(Universität Basel 2022: 2)⁸

On the other hand, it is noted that neographies (formulations with asterisks, colons or underscores such as *Professor*innen*, *Mitarbeiter:innen*, and *Dozent_innen*) may be used extensively in other types of texts in order to include non-binary gender identities as well, although they are not recommended by official bodies such as the Council for German Orthography⁹ and the Federal Chancellery. The latter, in particular, states that the only abbreviated form that can be used is the one with a slash (e. g. *Stimmbürger/-innen*), whereas spellings with brackets (*Stimmbürger(innen)*), medial capital I (*StimmbürgerInnen*), asterisks (*Stimmbürger*innen*) or colons (*Stimmbürger:innen*) are not permitted (cf. Bundeskanzlei 2023: 6f).¹⁰

3 Corpus and text type

In order to study the use of gender-sensitive language in job advertisements of German-speaking Swiss universities, a dedicated representative corpus was created as a basis for analysing the most common phenomena and strategies. Methodologically, the plan was to select three job

⁷ The *Gender app* is designed as a democratic dictionary and helps you find gender-neutral wording; you can search the dictionary for specific terms or use the Word add-in to highlight gender-neutral wording in real time. The *Gender Glossar* is an online journal that presents knowledge on gender and diversity from an intersectional perspective in an interdisciplinary manner, for use in academic and practical work both within and outside the university context.

⁸ ‘With regard to legally relevant, legislative texts (statutes, regulations, directives), the University of Basel follows the requirements of the Canton of Basel-Stadt and/or the guidelines of the Federal Chancellery. As legal certainty and clarity are decisive in these texts, dual forms or neutral forms are used throughout in place of the generic masculine form. Non-binary gender identities are not explicitly mentioned, but are implicitly taken into account, as the university regulatory texts and other official texts are per se addressed to all members of the university community.’ (My translation.)

⁹ In German Rat für deutsche Rechtschreibung (Rfdr). The Council rejects the use of special characters, as they are not part of standard spelling and can therefore cause grammatical issues and make the text less clear or difficult to read. A distinction between spelling and typography is also made (cf. Rfdr 2023: 5–7).

¹⁰ It should be borne in mind that neographies appear less widespread in Switzerland than in the other German-speaking countries due to, among other things, differences in legal frameworks: Germany and Austria introduced the third gender recognition in 2017 and 2018 respectively (in Germany there is even the “no entry” fourth option), whereas Switzerland lacks this recognition (cf. Crestani et al. 2026: 56).

advertisements for each German-speaking university; however, at the time of the research (July 2024 – November 2025), for some of them only one or two advertisements could be found, as there were no vacancies to apply for. All in all, therefore, the number of texts collected was 71, totalling 31,556 tokens and 25,029 words.¹¹ In the selected texts, the positions considered were those of professor, researcher or academic staff member, head of department or project (with teaching responsibilities), lecturer, vice-rector, assistant, and postdoctoral researcher. Let us now take a closer look at how these texts are structured and what information they usually contain.

Job advertisements issued by Swiss academic institutions are quite short informative documents, generally ranging from one to three pages in length. These texts serve a dual purpose: to ensure maximum administrative transparency and to act as a tool for attracting and selecting staff. Although their structure may vary in form between different universities, they follow a recurring, standardised model that organises the information according to a precise logical hierarchy. The opening section of the advertisement is intended to provide a clear definition of the vacant position and the relevant contractual specifications. It normally includes the following essential elements:

- institutional context: a description of the professional role and the relevant scientific-disciplinary field, often associated with a unique identification code (*Kennziffer* or *Referenz*);
- employment terms: indication of the percentage of the workload (*Pensum*) and the legal nature of the employment relationship (fixed-term or permanent contract);
- logistical and timing details: specification of the place of work (sometimes including a Google map) and the start date of employment, with an indication, where applicable, of the percentage of teleworking permitted.

Another important section in this text type is the description of the university or the relevant department, which serves a strategic and motivational purpose, aimed at presenting the institution in a positive light by outlining its overall values and objectives. In terms of layout, this section can appear in various places: it may be included at the start of the vacancy notice, to immediately outline the context (this is the case in 70% of the advertisements considered), or it may be placed after the job description (a choice found in 30% of the texts in the corpus). In certain job advertisements, this paragraph begins with a headline in an advertising or promotional style: this is the case, for example, in the texts from the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts (HSLU (Hochschule Luzern)), which open with the phrase *Näher dran*, followed by variations depending on the sector and type of vacancy: for example, *Näher dran am Puls von Kultur und Wirtschaft* or *Näher dran an Kultur und Gesellschaft*.¹² In some other cases, this section makes explicit reference to the issues of gender equality and inclusion, with links to the web pages and guidelines we described in the previous paragraph. Here is an example from a job advertisement by the ETH:

¹¹ These statistics and the data presented below were compiled using the Sketch Engine analysis software.

¹² *Näher dran* ('closer to') is, as a matter of fact, the slogan that characterises all of this university's communications. In these two examples, the idea being conveyed is that of wanting to be closer to the heartbeat of culture and business in the first case, and to culture and society in the second one (cf. HSLU).

Im Einklang mit unseren Werten unterstützt die ETH Zürich eine inklusive Kultur. Wir fördern Chancengleichheit, schätzen Vielfalt und pflegen ein Arbeits- und Lernumfeld, in dem die Rechte und die Würde aller Mitarbeitenden und Studierenden respektiert werden. Auf unserer Webseite zur Chancengleichheit und Vielfalt erfahren Sie, wie wir ein faires und offenes Umfeld sicherstellen, in dem sich alle entwickeln und entfalten können.¹³

In some cases (28% of the texts), an image is also included: with the exception of three advertisements (one with an abstract pattern and two featuring just a man), the images always feature women, either on their own or in a mixed group of men and women. This element, too, may be considered significant in terms of inclusivity and gender equality.¹⁴

The core of this text type is represented by the definition of the scope of the activities envisaged and the eligibility criteria for candidates, structured into two main areas:

- job description: a breakdown of teaching, research, support and scientific dissemination activities. Stylistically, this section alternates between a particularly concise, nominal style and more detailed verbal descriptions, typically organised into bulleted lists;
- selection criteria and skills: a detailed list of the necessary requirements, such as academic qualifications, previous professional experience, personal aptitudes and language skills of the ideal candidate profile.

Another element that is not systematic but frequently encountered is the university's presentation of its offering in terms of working environment and employee benefits. This section is sometimes accompanied by visual elements, such as icons with brief captions, designed to summarise the competitive advantages of the role (e. g. on-site childcare, travel passes, training courses).

The concluding section covers procedural aspects as well as regulatory and digital references. It includes details about the application procedure: mainly operational instructions for submitting it via specific institutional links, specifying the required documents and attachments and identifying the contact persons for any queries. At the very end of the text, we often find hyperlinks and multimedia elements, such as links to the university's website, legal notices and cantonal employment platforms. Social media icons (Instagram, LinkedIn, Facebook) are also frequently comprised, and as mentioned before, in some cases there is some visual material depicting university staff, within which there is almost always a consistent and systematic representation of female staff.

4 Linguistic strategies of visibility and neutralisation

Having described the underlying principles that characterise the issue of gender-sensitive language in German-speaking Swiss universities and outlined the structure and general content of guidelines and job advertisements, we will now turn to a detailed examination of the linguistic

¹³ 'In line with our values, ETH Zurich supports an inclusive culture. We promote equal opportunities, value diversity and foster a working and learning environment in which the rights and dignity of all staff and students are respected. On our website dedicated to equal opportunities and diversity, you can find out how we ensure a fair and open environment in which everybody can develop and flourish.' (My translation.)

¹⁴ The basic idea is that the inclusion of images featuring only men may carry the risk that women feel they are not suitable for the designated position, that is why they had better be avoided (cf. Hentschel et al. 2018: 17).

mechanisms implemented to ensure inclusivity and non-discrimination in practice. As Horvath (2015: 270) puts it, “organizations can actually use gender-fair language in order to attract more potential applicants, to prevent biases in recruiting, hiring, and evaluating (future) leaders and, furthermore, to create a more equality- and fairness-oriented organizational image”. The various cases will be classified into two broad categories: visibility strategies and neutralisation strategies.

4.1 Visibility strategies

Visibility strategies in gender-sensitive language aim to explicitly represent women and non-binary people in texts in order to break away from the exclusively male generic masculine form, thus emphasising people’s gender identity. Fundamentally, there can be two approaches: binary visibility (with focus on women and men)¹⁵ and inclusive visibility (taking into account all gender identities). It is important to bear in mind that not all strategies are perceived and accepted equally: some (like epicene nouns and splitting) are widely accepted and promoted by official guidelines, some other (in particular, the use of neographies) are controversial, as they are not considered part of German orthography (cf. Link 2026: 29). In the texts under consideration, the predominant approach is that of binary visibility, which is expressed through various forms of full and synthetic splitting.

As far as full splitting is concerned, the most common strategy is that of using a slash, of which there are 24 instances. This form is found exclusively in the singular and, in four cases, concerns the subject personal pronouns (*er/sie*, i. e. ‘he/she’). Another fairly common form is that of the use of the feminine noun and the corresponding masculine noun joined by the conjunction *und* (‘and’, 10 cases, all in the plural). Less frequent is the use of the conjunctions *bzw.* (‘and/or’, 7 instances) and *oder* (‘or’, 2 instances, only in the singular). It should be noted that in the case of *bzw.*, hybrid forms that mix extended and synthetic parts are also found, as in the case of *eine/-n Prorektorin bzw. Prorektor*, where the noun is fully split and the indefinite article is shortened. As regards the order between masculine and feminine forms, it is noted that in 86% of all cases the feminine form precedes the masculine. The following table provides an overview of these phenomena with two examples for each type of full splitting.

Type of full splitting	Occurrences	Examples of linguistic realization
With slash	24	<i>die neue StelleninhaberIn/der neue Stelleninhaber; Facharzt/Fachärztin</i>
With the conjunction <i>und</i>	10	<i>Bewerberinnen und Bewerber; Kolleginnen und Kollegen</i>
With the conjunction <i>bzw.</i>	7	<i>vom künftigen Lehrstuhlinhaber bzw. von der künftigen LehrstuhlinhaberIn; schulische Heilpädagogin bzw. schulischer Heilpädagoge</i>
With the conjunction <i>oder</i>	2	<i>einer Chefärztin oder eines Chefarztes; die StelleninhaberIn oder der Stelleninhaber</i>

Table 1: Overview of full splitting types in the analysed corpus

¹⁵ In Germany that is actually not allowed due to the *Personenstandsgesetz* (‘Civil Status Act’), which came into force in 2009.

The synthetic splitting strategies applied in the corpus of job advertisements are much more frequent than those involving full splitting: there are as many as 229 of them out of a total, as mentioned, of 71 texts. This is actually no coincidence: as a matter of fact, the use of concise forms with special characters not only offers the advantage of creating less verbose expressions, but also serves to give linguistic expression to social genders and gender identities that go beyond the binary system (cf. Diewald/Steinhauer 2022: 130). In our corpus, the most common mechanism is by far the use of the masculine form of the noun followed by an asterisk and the feminine singular suffix *-in* (115 instances) or the feminine plural suffix *-innen* (15). We also frequently find the use of the colon (80 occurrences, 67 of which in the singular) and the slash-dash combination (16 cases, only one of which in the plural). The use of the interpunct is sporadic (only three instances, two in the plural and one in the singular); neographies using internal I (*Binnen-I*), underscore and brackets are entirely absent.¹⁶ The table below summarises this data and provides some illustrative examples.

Type of synthetic splitting	Occurrences	Examples of linguistic realization
With asterisk	130	<i>Dozent*in; Bewerber*innen</i>
With colon	80	<i>Dozent:in; Professor:innen</i>
With slash and dash	16	<i>Assistent/-in; Schüler/-innen</i>
With interpunct	3	<i>Wissenschaftliche-r Mitarbeiter-in; Didaktiker-innen</i>

Table 2: Overview of synthetic splitting types in the analysed corpus

A special case of a visibility strategy that complements the mechanisms described above is the inclusion of the abbreviation *m/w/d*, which stands for *männlich/weiblich/divers* ('male/female/diverse').¹⁷ This abbreviation, which appears 17 times in the corpus under consideration – e. g. *Doktorand*in in Kriminologie (m/w/d)* –, ensures that people of all gender identities, including non-binary individuals, feel addressed and can apply for the vacancy without perceiving any discrimination.¹⁸

4.2 Neutralisation strategies

Neutralisation strategies are also widely used in the job advertisements included in the corpus. Although they vary considerably, they share the common aim of not explicitly stating the gender of the individuals referred to, the fact that they do not need to resort to neographies,

¹⁶ The decision to avoid the use of brackets is understandable, as this symbol was originally designed to enclose secondary, incidental or negligible elements. Placing the feminine ending in brackets could implicitly suggest that the masculine form is the primary and standard one, whilst the feminine form is merely an optional, secondary or subordinate addition. The use of the other two symbols, on the contrary, does not present this potential issue and is also provided for as an option in some of the guidelines issued by Swiss universities.

¹⁷ In job advertisements published in German-speaking countries, it is common to add a gender-specific notation in brackets (*m/w/d*), (*m/w/i*) or (*m/w/x*). The notation (*gn*) for *geschlechtsneutral* ('gender-neutral') is also frequently used. This applies particularly for roles with English job titles for which there is often no feminine form available in German (cf. Diewald/Steinhauer 2022: 141).

¹⁸ The basic principle is that job advertisements should take into account that the required gender neutrality applies not only to women and men, but to all potential gender identities (cf. ADS 2018: 6).

abbreviations or other ploys that might distort the morphology of the German language, and the advantage of being concise and easy to read and understand. It should be noted that the texts analysed do not contain any impersonal pronouns, such as *jemand*, *man*, *niemand* or *wer*. This can be attributed, on the one hand, to the fact that a pronoun such as *man* is etymologically and phonetically related to the noun *Mann*, which would preclude neutralisation; on the other hand, to the fact that pronouns such as *jemand* often require a possessive adjective later in the sentence, which could in turn negate the neutralising effect. Let us now analyse the various mechanisms that are implemented in the texts under consideration.

The most widely adopted neutralisation strategy is the use of abstract nouns, a choice which, as well as being gender-sensitive, places the focus on roles, activities and responsibilities rather than on the individual. This is undoubtedly an effective strategy, but it might sometimes be felt a bit impersonal. The most commonly used abstract nouns are *Professur* (or *Professuren*, in the plural form, 57 occurrences in total), *Profil* (53), *Position* (along with its plural *Positionen* and noun compounds like *Postdoktoratsposition*, 8 occurrences in total) and *Dozentur* (3).

Another strategy that does not concentrate on the individual dimension is the use of collective nouns. Unlike abstract nouns, the focus is not on roles and functions, but on institutional bodies, units and groups of people. In addition to inclusivity, this linguistic choice emphasises group identity and collaboration over individualism, potentially fostering a sense of collegiality and belonging. The most commonly used collective nouns are *Team* (46 occurrences), *Abteilung* (or its plural *Abteilungen*, 22 occurrences in total), *Personal* (7), *Gruppe* (along with its compound *Fachgruppe*, 4). In four cases, the plural indefinite pronoun *alle* ('everybody') is also used. This is a strategy that offers numerous advantages from the perspective of gender-sensitive language and from a communicative point of view: extreme brevity, with positive implications for fluency and readability; inclusion of the entire spectrum of gender identities, given that this form does not involve inflectional distinctions for the various grammatical genders; simplification and accessibility.

Pretty much different is the use of epicene nouns: unlike the two categories described above, such nouns retain a direct reference to individual people and ensure neutrality by having a single, fixed grammatical gender to indicate people of any sex or gender identity. In our corpus of job advertisements, they are used in both the singular and plural forms. The most common are *Person* (along with its plural form *Personen* and the compound nouns *Führungspersonen* and *Fachpersonen*, 23 occurrences in total), *Menschen* (13, only in the plural), *Kinder* (only in the plural, 8) and *Lehrkräfte* (only in the plural, 3).

Another way of neutralising grammatical gender – and, consequently, any reference to gender identity – is through the use of acronyms and anglicisms to identify individuals, their academic qualifications and/or the roles they hold. In the analysed corpus, this strategy is employed in the case of abbreviations such as PhD (6 occurrences), MD (2) and MD-PhD (1), and in the case of nouns such as *Lecturer* (3 occurrences, combined with the adjectives *Junior*, *Advanced* and *Senior*), *Stakeholdern* (2, with German dative plural inflection) and *People of Colour* (1). This last example is particularly significant, as it also relates to the issue of ethnic inclusivity, as can be seen from this sentence taken from a job advertisement by the Universität Bern ('University of Bern'): *Die Universität Bern freut sich über Bewerbungen von Menschen mit Be-*

*hinderung, People of Color und von Menschen, die im Schweizer Kontext zu ethnischen Minderheiten gehören.*¹⁹

A similar case of focusing on the individual using gender-neutral forms is that of the substantiation of adjectives and participles, with a clear prevalence of present participles used as nouns. The most frequent nominalised present participles are *Studierende/Studierenden*,²⁰ 65 occurrences), *Mitarbeitende/Mitarbeitenden* (27), *Dozierende/Dozierenden* (11), and *Quereinsteigende* (3). The only nominalised adjective found in the corpus is *Berufsbildungsverantwortliche/Berufsbildungsverantwortlichen* (2 occurrences). It should be noted, however, that unlike epicene nouns this strategy is purely gender-neutral only in the plural.²¹ In the singular, for the same noun, differences can be observed in terms of articles and noun inflection depending on whether the reference is to a female or male individual. All the examples found in the corpus are in the plural, which confirms the neutralising intent of the use of this strategy in this text type.

In addition to lexical choices, gender neutrality can also be achieved through syntactic strategies. This is the case with passive constructions that do not explicitly identify the referent: omitting the subject and shifting the focus to the action or the object eliminates the potential for discriminatory and/or non-inclusive language at source. This is the case, for instance, for sentences taken from our corpus like *Eine regelmässige Präsenz in Chur wird vorausgesetzt* (job advertisement from the Fach Hochschule Graubünden ('University of Applied Sciences of the Grisons')) or *Erwartet wird die intensive Zusammenarbeit mit den Abteilungen des Instituts, den Bildungswissenschaften und Fachdidaktiken* (job advertisement from the Pädagogische Hochschule Freiburg ('Freiburg University of Education')).²²

Another factor that can be brought into play to neutralise the gendered content of texts is that of the modality of address. In the texts under consideration, for example, direct polite address (third-person plural pronoun *Sie*) is exploited quite frequently: this is a mechanism which, as we saw above with regard to the passive voice, allows the avoidance of potentially non-inclusive and/or discriminatory nouns.²³ This strategy is found, among other places, in the introductory sentences of the different sections of the job advertisements. Here three examples from the corpus: *Wir begeistern Sie mit* (3 occurrences, to introduce the description of advantages and benefits for the candidate); *Das bringen Sie mit* (5 occurrences, to indicate required

¹⁹ 'The University of Bern welcomes applications from people with disabilities, people of colour, and people who belong to ethnic minorities in the Swiss context.' (My translation.)

²⁰ The existence of two different forms is due to the fact that, in German, plural nouns add an *-n* in the dative case.

²¹ Since the plural in German has no gender, when we use terms referring to people that are nominalised adjectives or participles in the plural, we do not need to distinguish between genders; in other words, the grammatical gender is neutralised and these terms are therefore gender-neutral (cf. Diwald/Steinhauer 2022: 75f.)

²² The two sentences read respectively: 'Regular attendance in Chur is required' and 'Intensive collaboration is expected with the institute's departments, the educational sciences and subject-specific didactics.' (My translation, cf. Fachhochschule Graubünden and Pädagogische Hochschule Freiburg.)

²³ The gender-neutral phrasing using the direct address *Sie* is a very good solution in many formal contexts where it does not matter who exactly is being addressed; moreover, this pronoun is usually shorter than the generic masculine form or gender-sensitive formulations (cf. Diwald/Steinhauer 2022: 137).

qualifications and skills); *Sie sind verantwortlich für folgende Hauptaufgaben* (1 occurrence, to introduce future duties).

The table below summarises and briefly illustrates the various neutralisation strategies identified in the corpus and described in this section.

Type of neutralisation strategy	Examples of linguistic realization
Abstract nouns	<i>Professur; Dozentur</i>
Collective nouns	<i>Team; Personal</i>
Epicene nouns	<i>Fachpersonen; Menschen</i>
Acronyms	<i>PhD; MD-PhD</i>
Anglicisms	<i>Senior Lecturer; People of Colour</i>
Nominalised adjectives	<i>Berufsbildungsverantwortliche</i>
Nominalised participles	<i>Dozierende; Quereinsteigende</i>
Passive forms	<i>Erwartet wird Erfahrung in der Lehre; Eine regelmässige Präsenz in Chur wird vorausgesetzt</i>
Direct address	<i>Wir begeistern Sie mit; Das bringen Sie mit</i>

Table 3: Overview of neutralisation strategies identified in the corpus

5 Generic masculine and rewriting

All the visibility and neutralisation strategies described in the previous paragraph are based on a common premise: that of moving beyond the generic masculine. This is actually one of the fundamental principles of gender-sensitive language, which challenges the assumption that the generic masculine implicitly includes the feminine gender (and, where applicable, other gender identities).²⁴ In some guidelines issued by Swiss universities, this aspect is clearly stated and explained, as can be seen from the following extract from the Universität Bern's guidelines:

Mit der Argumentation, geschlechtergerechte Sprache sei umständlich und unlesbar, wird nach wie vor das so genannte «generische Maskulinum» verteidigt. Es wird mit dem Argument zu stützen versucht, dass Frauen bei männlichen Personenbezeichnungen mitgemeint seien, weil männliche Wortformen eine allgemeine («generische»), geschlechtsübergreifende Bedeutung hätten. Diese Sicht ist unzutreffend. Beim Lesen und Hören männlicher Personenbezeichnungen werden Frauen nicht gleichberechtigt gedanklich einbezogen. Mit dem generischen Maskulinum wird nicht nur die Ungleichbehandlung von Frauen und Männern aufrechterhalten, sondern wird auch missverständlich und unhöflich formuliert. Eine einleitende Generalklausel («Der Einfachheit halber wird im folgenden Text nur die männliche Form verwendet, weibliche Personen sind mitgemeint.») vermag diese Defizite nicht wettzumachen. Sie mutet wie eine halbherzige Alibi-Aktion ohne Einsicht in das Problem an. Wo Frauen nämlich nicht explizit genannt sind, werden

²⁴ Gender-sensitive language in everyday life, and particularly in research and teaching, should be the norm, but it is often not yet consistently implemented (cf. Ivanov/Lange/Tiemeyer 2018: 272).

sie seltener mitgedacht und fühlen sie sich auch seltener angesprochen (zum Beispiel bei Stellenausschreibungen).²⁵

(Universität Bern 2017: 7)

The main point is that in the debate surrounding inclusive language there are still those who argue in favour of the generic masculine, assuming that masculine pronominal and nominal forms possess an inherent generic value and thereby implicitly encompass female referents. Another argument often put forward in defense of the generic masculine is that it offers advantages in terms of textual economy, readability, and comprehensibility. However, there are studies that have shown that the cognitive processing of gender-neutral texts is just as successful as the processing of texts written in the generic masculine, which makes it appear unnecessary to formulate texts in the generic masculine for reasons of comprehensibility (cf. Braun et al. 2007: 189 and Cruz Neri/Siems-Muntoni 2026: 178). All in all, not only does the generic masculine reinforce gender asymmetry, but also compromises pragmatic clarity and politeness.²⁶ Sometimes its use causes difficulties, as there are no consistent rules governing when it should be understood as generic and when as specifically masculine.²⁷ This awareness of the inadequacy of the generic masculine should generally apply in institutional and academic communication, and all the more so in texts concerning recruitment, as the ones we are analyzing in this paper. This is because in the workplace it is essential to bridge the gender gap not only in economic terms, but also in terms of language and social perception.

In the corpus of job advertisements from Swiss universities examined, we have seen that various mechanisms are widely used to formulate texts in accordance with the principles of gender-sensitive language. However, there are also examples of the use of the generic masculine form in both the singular and plural, which sometimes appear in the same sentence alongside inclusive phrasing, as can be seen in the case of the underlined nouns in the following sentences:

- (1) *Die/der zukünftige Stelleninhaber/in befasst sich mit wissenschaftlichen Fragestellungen aus der Versorgungsforschung in Hausarztmedizin, interprofessioneller Grundversorgung und Community Care, inklusive des Wissenstransfers an Studierende, Gesundheitsversorgende und Entscheidungssträger im Gesundheitswesen.*

(Universität Luzern)

²⁵ ‘On the grounds that gender-neutral language is cumbersome and unreadable, the so-called “generic masculine” continues to be defended on the grounds. It is argued that women are implicitly included in masculine forms of address because these forms have a general (“generic”), gender-neutral meaning. This view is inappropriate. When reading or hearing male personal designations, women are not equally mentally included. The generic masculine not only perpetuates unequal treatment of women and men, but is also formulated in a way that is misleading and impolite. An introductory general clause (“For the sake of simplicity, only the masculine form is used in the following text; female persons are included.”) cannot make up for these shortcomings. It comes across as a half-hearted token gesture that does not understand the problem. Where women are not explicitly mentioned, they are less likely to be considered and are also less likely to feel addressed (for example, in job advertisements)’. (My translation.)

²⁶ The use of the generic masculine form violates the fundamental principle of communication, which is to ensure clarity and avoid ambiguity, and reinforces the discrimination against women (cf. Diwald/Steinhauer 2022: 88).

²⁷ If the context does not provide this information, ambiguity arises regarding the reference (cf. Ivanov/Lange/Tiemeyer 2018: 284).

- (2) *Sie koordinieren die Zusammenarbeit der verschiedenen Anspruchsgruppen und Kunden, beraten diese bei deren Situationsanalyse oder Prozessgestaltung und führen allgemeine Schulungen zu diesen Themen durch.*

(Pädagogische Hochschule Graubünden)

- (3) *Einen attraktiven Arbeitgeber mit einem grossen nationalen und internationalen Netzwerk.*

(Universität Basel)

- (4) *Ihre integrative und interdisziplinäre Perspektive ermöglicht eine zielorientierte Zusammenarbeit über Departementsgrenzen hinweg bis hin zu Stakeholdern ausserhalb der Universität.*

(Universität Basel)

In example (1), we see the simultaneous use of visibility strategies (abbreviation with a slash: *Die/der zukünftige Stelleninhaber/in*) and neutralisation strategies (present participles used as nouns: *Studierende* and *Gesundheitsversorgende*) alongside the generic masculine plural term *Entscheidungsträger*. In sentence (2), there is no consistency in terms of gender-sensitive language, too: the neutralisation provided by the direct address form *Sie* and the use of a collective noun such as *Anspruchsgruppen* is counterbalanced by the generic masculine plural *Kunden*. In example (3), we also find a discrepancy between the use of the collective term *Netzwerk* and the generic masculine singular *Arbeitgeber*. Finally, in sentence (4), the use of the anglicism *stakeholder* is not sufficient to ensure inclusivity, as the nominal suffix *-er* in designations of people and roles is usually perceived as distinctly masculine in German.

In cases such as those outlined above, it is advisable to rewrite any sections that do not comply with the principles of gender-sensitive language, following the guidelines provided by the relevant institution. In the absence of such guidelines, or as a useful supplement, it is highly effective to make use of a tool such as the *Genderwörterbuch* provided by the *Geschickt gendersn* platform. This practical resource, which, as mentioned above, is sometimes recommended by the universities' own guidelines, is structured as a two-column glossary: the first column contains the non-gendered terms (*ungegenderte Begriffe*, usually nouns, but sometimes also more complex phrases, idioms or entire sentences), whilst the second column contains the gender-inclusive alternatives (*gendergerechte Alternativen*) and/or explanations of the term in question. In some cases, it is stated that further alternatives are being sought, and users are invited to submit their suggestions via the form provided (see, for example, the text in blue under the heading *Anwender* in the image below).

Anwender (sg.)	anwendende Person; weitere Alternativen gesucht; senden Sie Ihren Vorschlag über das Kontaktformular (klick)
Anwender (pl.)	Nutzende; Anwendende; Personen, die ... anwenden; Anwendung
anwenderbezogen	anwendungsbezogen; praxisbezogen; verwendungsbezogen; menschbezogen
Anwenderfehler	Anwendungsfehler; Bedienfehler
Anwenderfreundlichkeit	Verwendungsfreundlichkeit
Anwenderkurs	Anwendungskurs; Praxiskurs

Figure 2: Examples of entries taken from the *Genderwörterbuch*

Let us now look, by way of example, at what is proposed by this dictionary with regard to the four generic masculine nouns identified in the corpus of job advertisements discussed above:

Non-gendered terms	Gender-inclusive alternatives
<i>Entscheidungsträger (pl.)</i>	<i>Entscheidungstragende</i>
<i>Kunden (pl.)</i>	<i>Kundschaft; Klientel; kaufende Personen; Menschen; Personen; Nutzende; Auftraggebende; Nachfrage; Zielgruppe; Kaufinteressierte; Interessierte; Kreis; Gäste; Publikum; Betroffene</i>
<i>Arbeitgeber (sg.)</i>	<i>Führungskraft; arbeitgebendes Unternehmen; Person, die Arbeitsplätze zur Verfügung stellt; [im Arbeitsvertrag konkret:] Firma, Unternehmen, Gesellschaft, Genossenschaft, Einrichtung, Institution, Amt, Behörde; Arbeitsstelle</i>
<i>Stakeholder (pl.)</i>	<i>Anspruchsgruppe; Interessenvertretung</i>

Table 4: Useful gender-inclusive alternatives for rewriting, as suggested by the *Genderwörterbuch* (adapted from the website of *Geschickt gendern*)

This resource therefore allows users, on the one hand, to check whether the term or expression is indeed to be considered non-compliant from the perspective of gender-sensitive language (and in our case, it confirms that all four terms are non-compliant), and, on the other hand, to obtain suggestions for replacement and rewriting.

6 Conclusions

The issue of inclusivity and non-discrimination is of significant importance within the Swiss academic context, and is reflected in communication, both linguistically and visually. Most German-speaking universities have developed specific guidelines on gender-sensitive language, which this article examined in terms of both their general characteristics and their actual implementation in the specific context of job advertisements.

The corpus analysis revealed that there is widespread adoption of both the visibility and the neutralisation approach. As far as visibility strategies are concerned, synthetic splitting (above all with asterisk and colon) is much more frequent than full splitting, which stands in stark contrast to the provisions of the relevant national and/or some cantonal guidelines. On the other hand, the most frequent neutralisation strategies include abstract, collective, and epicene nouns, nominalised present participles, and direct address using the polite form *Sie*. To a lesser extent, anglicisms, acronyms, nominalised adjectives, and passive forms are also to be found.

Despite this focus on inclusive language use, which manifests itself in the various strategies described, the use of the generic masculine form persists in some cases. It is unclear whether this is a deliberate choice or the result of carelessness or sloppiness in drafting the texts. The fact remains that, for reasons of both gender sensitivity and formal consistency, it is advisable to rewrite the non-compliant sections of the advertisements. In this regard, it is very useful to exploit a tool such as the *Genderwörterbuch*, which offers effective alternatives that are generally suitable for a wide range of text types, as they do not include neographies that may be unsuitable or unacceptable in certain contexts (such as the legal one).

As this is a rapidly and constantly evolving field, future studies could examine other job advertisements, leading to new findings and interesting insights from both a synchronic and dia-

chronic point of view, or consider other significant text types in academic communication from a comparative perspective.

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