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The Role of Social Class in the Use of Gender-Inclusive Language: An Analysis of Polish and German Job Titles

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Abstract

Past research has found that gender-inclusive language is more commonly used in egalitarian cultures. People in middle-class communities not only endorse more egalitarian values but also more strongly believe that social change is possible than people in working-class communities. As such, there may be a higher demand for and, thus, use of gender-inclusive language in middle-class professions than for working class professions. Two studies investigated the use of feminine and gender-inclusive job titles for working vs. middle class professions in two grammatical gender languages, namely feminine job titles in Polish corpus texts (Study 1) and gender-inclusive job titles in Swiss German job advertisements (Study 2). Results showed that feminine and gender-inclusive job titles were indeed more often used for middle- than for working-class professions in both countries. These findings document the need to take social class into account in future language research as well as in the implementation of language reforms.

Keywords

grammatical gender, gender-inclusive language, social class, egalitarian values



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Highlights

Past research has found that gender-fair language is more commonly used in egalitarian cultures. As people in middle-class communities endorse more egalitarian values and have stronger beliefs that social change is possible than people in working-class communities, gender-fair language may be demanded more actively and therefore used more often for middle-class professions than for working class professions. This research is the first documenting that feminine and gender-fair job titles were more often used for middle- than for working-class professions, underlining the need for taking social class into account in future language research as well as in the implementation of language reforms.

The common use of masculine language forms (nouns and pronouns) to refer to women and men and people with unspecified gender—so called masculine generics—often excludes women (Stahlberg et al., 2007) and completely ignores the existence of people of other genders. Instead, speakers tend to visualize and recall mostly male exemplars, perpetuating an androcentric bias (Bailey & LaFrance, 2017). Further, masculine generics promote sexist attitudes (Wasserman & Weseley, 2009) and perpetuate gender inequality (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018). As language plays an important role in communicating cultural values and practices and thus also cultural inequalities (Hollander & Abelson, 2014), language reforms have been initiated by feminist linguists to counteract effects of gender discrimination imposed through masculine generics (Bußmann & Hellinger, 2003). The promotion of gender-inclusive language (GIL; also called "non-sexist language", UNESCO, 1999) aims to reform language in a way that it represents men and women symmetrically (see Hellinger & Bußmann, 2001, 2002, 2003).

Past research has documented that the success of language reforms promoting GIL depends on the structure of the respective language (Sczesny et al., 2016). Factors that might influence the implementation of GIL are social values, as in more egalitarian countries GIL has been implemented more effectively than in less egalitarian countries (DeFranza et al., 2020; Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012), and occupational gender segregation, as in female-dominated branches (health care), gender-inclusive job titles were more prevalent in job advertisements than in male-dominated branches (constructional steel and metal work; Hodel et al., 2017). Another factor that might determine GIL use is social class, differentiating social groups based on occupational prestige, educational attainment, and economic attainment (Kraus et al., 2017). It is reasonable to assume that higher levels of egalitarian values in middle-class communities (Carvacho et al., 2013; Kalmijn & Kraaykamp, 2007) as well as a stronger engagement in broader social movements (Nayak & Pandey, 2021) might contribute to the promotion of GIL in middle-class communities. This might further be facilitated by stronger beliefs in middle-class communities that social change is possible (Fernández-Ballesteros et al., 2002).

Social class differences in the promotion of GIL, together with other factors, may perpetuate gender discrimination in working-class jobs. Indeed, the contribution of male biases in job advertisements for working-class professions discrimination against women in these jobs is supported by a seminal study by Bem and Bem (1973). This study revealed that when a typically male profession of low status was advertised in the masculine form, only 5% of women were interested in applying, but when the same profession was framed in a gender-neutral way, 25% of women were interested in applying, despite the strong male typicality of the job ('telephone lineman'). Building on these findings, gender discrimination was found to be particularly pronounced for working-class professions dominated by one gender and advertised in a stereotypical way (Yavorsky, 2019).

This research therefore investigated whether feminine and gender-inclusive job titles are used more often for middle- than working-class professions. This question was examined in two grammatical gender languages, namely in Polish and German, by analyzing the use of feminine job titles in Polish corpus texts and the use of gender-inclusive job titles (such as pair-forms explicitly addressing women and men) in Swiss German job advertisements (listed on an online job search engine). The following subsections describe how GIL can contribute to the reduction of social discrimination, how the promotion of GIL can be successful, and why the promotion of GIL may differ for middle- and working-class professions.

Gender-Inclusive Language and Social Discrimination

GIL can contribute to the reduction of discrimination (Szczesny et al., 2016) by correcting for the fact that traditional language use is asymmetrical in the way it represents and addresses women and men. Although generically intended, masculine forms intended as generic represent a male bias and evoke associations of predominantly male exemplars (e.g., Vervecken et al., 2013). 'False masculine generics' are prevalent in many languages and have similar effects of male bias in many countries (Formanowicz & Hansen, 2022). This leads to a higher usage of masculine forms, which substantiates the association of masculine forms with male exemplars (Gabriel et al., 2018), that is, the androcentric bias of men as the typical human (Bailey & LaFrance, 2017). When masculine forms are used in job advertisements or in other phases of recruitment, women are less likely to apply or to be considered for a position (Bem & Bem, 1973; Horvath & Szczesny, 2016). For that reason, GIL is now widely recommended for both official and scientific texts (e.g., American Psychological Association, 2009; European Commission, 2008; UNESCO, 1999).

Two principal strategies—neutralization and feminization—can be deployed to make a language gender-inclusive (Formanowicz & Hansen, 2022). In natural gender languages with few gender-differentiating forms like English, there is a tendency towards neutralization. Here, gender-unmarked forms such as *police officer* or *chairperson* are used to substitute the male-biased *policeman* or *chairman*. In grammatical gender languages

with more systematic gender differentiations like German and Polish, feminization is suggested. Here, feminine forms are used to make female referents visible (Gabriel et al., 2018). To designate female job holders, feminine job titles such as the German *Ingenieurin* (fem.) 'female engineer' or the Polish *lekarka* (fem.) 'female doctor' have been introduced; these feminine forms are also used in gender-inclusive pair-forms such as the German *Schneiderinnen* (fem.pl) *und Schneider* (masc.pl) or the Polish *krawcowa* (fem.pl) *i krawcy* (masc. pl) 'female and male tailors' (for feminization in German: Bußmann & Hellinger, 2003; and in Polish: Koniuszaniec & Blaszkowska, 2003).

GIL has been found to increase the cognitive availability of feminine exemplars of person categories. When women were explicitly mentioned, in a pair form for instance (like the German *Musikerinnen* (fem.pl) *und Musiker* (masc.pl) 'female and male musicians'), female exemplars of the category became more readily available (Stahlberg et al., 2001). Accordingly, GIL can increase women's chances in the context of hiring and employment. When gender-inclusive job titles were used in a job advertisement, recruiters' male-biases diminished (Horvath & Sczesny, 2016). When job advertisements were framed in a stereotypically masculine way, women were found to be less interested in applying (Bem & Bem, 1973); however, when the wording of the advertisement was unbiased (i.e., gender-inclusive), women were more interested in applying. Similarly, when confronted with the generic pronoun *he* in a mock job interview, women felt significantly more negative emotions and less intention to aim for, apply for, and pursue the job than women presented with gender-inclusive forms (i.e., word-pairs such as *he or she* or gender-neutral expressions such as *one* or *employee*, Stout & Dasgupta, 2011; for a replication see Rosenberger & Claypool, 2023). Taken together, past research underlines the importance of GIL use to reduce social discrimination of women in professional contexts.

The Promotion of Gender-Inclusive Language

The promotion of GIL depends on the structure of the respective language. Grammatical gender languages like Polish and German are strongly gender marked making the introduction of GIL complex in these languages (Sczesny et al., 2016). For instance, in Polish, feminine job titles are difficult to build and thus do not exist for all professions due to gender asymmetries in language structure (Koniuszaniec & Blaszkowska, 2003). More specifically, some feminine forms are associated with diminutive forms, such as *matematyczka* (fem) 'female mathematician' (or 'little mathematics'), while others are asymmetrical in meaning, such as *sekretarka* (fem) 'female secretary' (in the sense of 'personal assistant', whereas the masculine form *sekretarz* refers to a high governmental function). Yet, other forms in Polish carry the meaning 'wife of' rather than 'female job holder' such as *krawcowa* (fem) 'female tailor' or 'wife of a tailor'. In addition, the Polish suffix *-ka* is not only used for feminine job titles (such as *nauczyciel-ka* 'female teacher' from masculine *nauczyciel* 'teacher'), but also for inanimate objects, deriving *marynar-ka*

'jacket' from masculine *marynarz* 'sailor'. These aspects restrict the creation and use of feminine job titles in Polish. Further, the use of feminine job titles can have detrimental effects by resulting in negative evaluations of women applying for a job when using a feminine job title (Formanowicz et al., 2013, 2015; Formanowicz & Sczesny, 2016). In contrast to the Polish language, in German, feminine forms can be built easily by adding the suffix *-in* to the masculine form, such as *Ingenieur-in* (fem) 'female engineer' or by neutralizing a masculine term, such as *Lehrpersonen* 'teachers' instead of *Lehrer* 'male teachers'. In the latest version of the official German Dictionary, masculine as well as feminine forms for all professional job titles are listed (Dudenredaktion, 2020).

While for Polish no GIL guidelines exist to the best of our knowledge, in German-speaking countries the implementation of GIL has been discussed since the late 1970s (Trömel-Plötz, 1978) and respective guidelines have been introduced in many domains of German-speaking countries in recent decades. For instance, in the German speaking parts of Switzerland, almost all universities and governmental institutions have guidelines and specific regulations for the use of GIL (e.g., *Abteilung für die Gleichstellung von Frauen und Männern, Universität Bern* [Department of Gender Equality, University of Bern], latest version 2017; *City of Zurich*, specific regulations on formulation already 1996, latest revision 2022). In Austria, organizations are fined when they do not advertise jobs in a gender-inclusive way (*Gleichbehandlungsgesetz*, 2004) and consequently, Austrian job advertisements have been mostly written in GIL, with GIL use being significantly higher in job advertisements than in Switzerland (90% vs. 69%; Hodel et al., 2017). In Germany, guidelines were transferred into a binding law including equal treatment in job advertisements in 1998, resulting in almost 80% of job advertisements using GIL by 2003 (Hellinger, 2004). Taken together, the promotion of GIL has been more successful in countries in which formal regulations exist, and non-compliance has negative consequences (for an overview on the effectiveness of interventions and policies, see Sczesny et al., 2016).

Gender-Inclusive Language for Middle- and Working-Class Professions

Occupational status is a prominent indicator of people's social class (Kraus et al., 2017). According to international classification systems like ISCO (International Standard Classification of Occupations; International Labour Organization, 2012) or ESeC (European Socio-economic Classification Scheme; Wirth & Fischer, 2008), professions can be grouped together based on socio-economic status. Working-class professions such as routine workers and lower technicians, do not require higher education and are related to lower social status and lower salaries, whereas middle-class professions such as managers and professionals require higher education and are related to higher social status and higher salaries.

The different economic and social contexts middle- and working-class people are exposed to contribute to the considerably different cultures of these communities (Kraus & Stephens, 2012). Working-class people often face immediate economic pressures such as job insecurity, low wages, and poor working conditions, which makes them more likely to value the security of external control and increase their motivation to adjust, fit-in, and defer to authority. Middle-class people typically have more resources like education, financial stability, and social networks (e.g., Bowman et al., 2009; Pew Research Center, 2016) creating more opportunities for them. Moreover, middle-class communities compared to working-class communities endorse less anti-egalitarian, system-justifying ideologies such as right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and social-dominance orientation (Carvacho et al., 2013), and, most importantly, indicate less support for traditional gender roles (Kalmijn & Kraaykamp, 2007). Greater egalitarianism, as expressed in lower levels of sexism, gender-specific system justification, and social-dominance orientation, were found to be associated with more positive attitudes towards GIL (Douglas & Sutton, 2014). Working-class and middle-class people engage in different forms of collective action (Zepeda-Millán & Heaney, 2016). While working-class people are more likely to be involved in collective action that aims to improve their wages and working conditions (e.g., in labor strikes, union activities), middle-class people are more likely to be involved in collective action that focus on issues such as education, healthcare, housing, and local community concerns (e.g., in political lobbying, advocacy, and participation in civil society organizations) as well as in broader social movements (e.g., environmental activism, human rights, and political reform). Moreover, middle-class compared to working-class communities have stronger beliefs about social change being possible and that they can influence social change (Fernández-Ballesteros et al., 2002).

Accordingly, women from middle-class communities may more likely be motivated to promote GIL because they may perceive masculine generics as unfair, actively demand GIL for their professions, and may be more likely to think that language can be changed by their group than working-class women. Indeed, the first supporters of gender-inclusive German language were feminist linguists in the 1970s (Trömel-Plötz, 1978). In Poland, middle-class female members of the Polish parliament recently requested linguistic representation for women (Kielkiewicz-Janowiak, 2019). Working-class women, on the other hand, may be less interested in gender-inclusive job titles for their professions, because they may not perceive the use of masculine forms intended as generic as unfair and/or may perceive language change as too difficult or even irrelevant to their situation—both prominent arguments against GIL (Formanowicz & Szczesny, 2016; Vergoossen et al., 2020). Moreover, middle-class feminists have been especially influential in the public discourse on gender equality (Freeman, 1995), promoting egalitarian values through collective action towards gender equality on behalf of their group (Scarborough & Risman, 2020). Given that people from middle-class communities endorse more egalitarian values (Carvacho et al., 2013; Kalmijn & Kraaykamp, 2007) and have stronger beliefs that social

change is possible (Fernández-Ballesteros et al., 2002) than people from working-class communities, it is reasonable to assume that the use of GIL is more advanced for middle-class professions than for working-class professions. The higher popularity of GIL in middle-class communities has stimulated discussion of this topic in contemporary discourses in these communities (Freed, 2020) and may have thereby facilitated the dissemination of gender-inclusive job titles for middle-class professions (e.g., in job advertisements).

The Present Research and Hypothesis

The present research examined differences in the implementation of GIL for middle-class and working-class professions. More specifically, two studies tested the hypothesis that feminine and gender-inclusive job titles are more commonly used for middle-class than for working-class professions in two grammatical-gender languages, namely in Polish and German. These languages were chosen because they differ in their availability of GIL forms for professions and the degree of support for GIL in guidelines and legal regulations (see above).

Study 1 examined the use of feminine job titles in the Polish text National Corpus (which contains different types of texts published between 1999 and 2009), offering a unique opportunity to investigate GIL use in an extensive corpus comprising a large variety of linguistic data (no other comparable corpus has been released). Study 2 investigated the use of gender-inclusive job titles (including feminine forms, pair forms, and neutral forms) in German job advertisements sampled shortly after the sampling of Polish data had finished (published in Switzerland in 2012). Together, both studies provide a test of the hypothesis in two different languages and different types of texts from a comparable time, thereby increasing comparability on one hand and generalizability of the findings on the other. The anonymized datasets of both studies are openly available at Open Science Framework (see Hodel et al., 2025).

Study 1

Method

Study 1 employed the National Corpus of Polish 2008-2012 (Pęzik, 2012; <http://nkjp.pl/index.php?page=0&lang=1>) as a representative sample of language data for the years 1999-2009 (see Formanowicz & Sczesny, 2016). In total, the national corpus includes over fifteen hundred million words. The sample consisted of linguistic data from the following sources: press (50%), books (29%), spoken language (10%), the internet (7%), and other written materials (4%). To search for feminine forms of job titles, we first obtained the official list of professions from the Polish Statistical Office, containing 2,592 professions (based on the most detailed specification of the Polish Ministry of Labor). We

used the Polish dictionary contemporary to the corpus data (Dubisz, 2008) to classify all professions as having either only a masculine job title, both a masculine and a feminine form, or only a feminine form. From the initial list we excluded those professions that were listed as "other" (235 listings = 9.1% of the entire list) and 121 professions that were not included in the dictionary (4.7% of the total). We also excluded 318 professions for which no person was listed (12.3% of the total). Thus, the list consisted of 1,918 professions that were specific and in current use.

The search for job titles in the corpus was limited to single words, therefore several professions were collapsed into more comprehensive categories (e.g., 30 types of 'mechanics' and 89 types of 'teachers' were collapsed into the general categories of 'mechanic' and 'teacher', respectively). Moreover, we excluded professions that had a different meaning when shortened to a one-word term (e.g., 'insurance agent' - 'agent', 'master of production' - 'master'). Most importantly, we excluded professions whose feminine form could have a different meaning that would interfere with the corpus search (e.g., *cukierniczka* 'confectioner' (fem), which also means 'sugar bowl'). Interestingly, of 68 professions excluded due to such semantic asymmetries, 61 were working-class (45 with only a masculine job title and 16 with an available feminine form) and only 7 middle-class (6 with only a masculine job title and 1 with an available feminine form). This list comprised 354 professions, of which 131 (37%) had only the masculine form of the job title and 223 (63%) had both forms.

Each profession was categorized according to social class based on the distinction available on the website of the Polish Ministry of Labor, and specifically the classification of the professions based on the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) and the Polish indicator of the professional social standing in Poland (Domański et al., 2007). Specifically, the two first groups (Managers and Professionals) were classified as middle-class and the remaining groups as working-class (Technicians and Associate Professionals; Clerical Support Workers; Services and Sales Workers; Agricultural, Forestry and Fishery Workers; Craft and Related Trades Workers; Plant and Machine Operators and Assemblers and Elementary Occupations). To arrive at a clear distinction, we used only those professions that could be unequivocally categorized as either middle- or working-class. In those cases where multiple professions were collapsed into one, an educational level was assigned only when all professions shared the same status. Therefore, 20 professions were assigned no value, as they could belong to different categories: *malarz* 'painter', for instance, was categorized as both a high-status and a low-status profession in the original list, because the term can refer to both construction painters and artists. Thus, the final list consisted of 334 professions: 59% working-class professions (of which 47% had only the masculine form and 53% had both forms) and 41% middle-class professions (of which 62% had only the masculine form and 38% had both forms). The search in the Polish National Corpus included both singular and plural forms as well as different case forms of the feminine job titles. Feminine forms for the

professions that do not have official feminine forms were coined according to the rules of the Polish language and based on similar existing professions (for instance, existing *socjolożka* 'sociologist' (fem) served as a model for non-existent but similar words such as *geolożka* 'geologist' (fem)). These feminine forms were then validated by means of an internet search to determine whether any Polish speakers use them. The use of feminine job titles was coded as follows: When no feminine title was used in the analyzed period, we assigned the value 0 (134 professions), and when at least one feminine form occurred, we assigned the value 1 (220 professions).

Results

For professions with official feminine job titles, feminine titles were widely used in the text corpus; even for professions for which no official feminine titles exist, unofficial feminine titles were used (see Table 1).

Table 1

Feminine Job Titles in the Polish National Corpus

Availability of feminine job title	Minimum of one feminine job title in the corpus		
	no n (%)	yes n (%)	total n (%)
No official feminine job title available			
working-class	73 (78%)	20 (22%)	93 (100%)
middle-class	49 (58%)	36 (42%)	85 (100%)
total	122 (69%)	56 (31%)	178 (100%)
Official feminine job title available			
working-class	8 (8%)	95 (92%)	103 (100%)
middle-class	1 (2%)	52 (98%)	53 (100%)
total	9 (6%)	147 (94%)	156 (100%)
Total			
working-class	81 (41%)	115 (59%)	196 (100%)
middle class	50 (36%)	88 (64%)	138 (100%)
total	131 (39%)	203 (61%)	334 (100%)

A logistic regression with social class as the focal predictor and use of feminine job titles as the criterion, while controlling for the availability feminine job titles, tested whether the log odds of occurrences of feminine titles were related to the social class of professions. The regression was significant, $\chi^2(2) = 168.34$, $p < .001$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .54$. As predicted, the social class of professions predicted the use of feminine job titles, $B = 1.04$, $\text{Wald}(1) = 10.79$, $p = .001$, while controlling for the availability of feminine

forms, $B = 3.86$, $\text{Wald}(1) = 91.40$, $p < .001$. The odds ratio of 2.82 indicated that feminine job titles were used about three times more often for middle-class professions than for working-class professions in the Polish National Corpus.

To rule out the possibility that differences in GIL in lower- or middle-class job roles are due to gender segregation, we mapped each profession onto the percentage of women in each category, using data from the Polish Statistical Office, covering 2004-2008 (Wage Structure by Profession; Polish Statistical Office, 2004-2008). Since many job titles in the Polish National Corpus are quite detailed, we aggregated several of them into broader categories for the purposes of this analysis. For instance, we grouped specific medical titles such as cardiologist, endocrinologist, and general practitioner under the broader category of Health Professionals (excluding nurses and midwives), which has a percentage of women of 63.9%. Similarly, titles like editor or economist were coded under the category Social Sciences and Related Professionals, where the percentage of women is 80.3%. In total, we successfully coded 343 professions, which accounts for approximately 87.1% of the total professions (see Supplementary Materials for further details, Hodel et al., 2025).

Subsequently, we ran a logistic regression with social class as the focal predictor and the use of feminine job titles as the criterion, while controlling for the availability of feminine forms and the percentage of women in each profession. This analysis tested whether the log odds of occurrences of feminine titles were related to the social class of the profession. The regression was significant, $\chi^2(2) = 140.57$, $p < .001$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .53$. Again as predicted, social class of profession was a significant predictor of the use of feminine job titles, $B = 0.93$, $\text{Wald}(1) = 7.135$, $p = .008$, while controlling for the availability of feminine forms and the percentage of women in each profession, $B = 0.00$, $\text{Wald}(1) = 0.00$, $p = .997$. The odds ratio of 2.54 indicated that feminine job titles were used about two and a half times more often for middle-class professions than for working-class professions in the Polish National Corpus.

Discussion

Study 1 found that the social class of professions predicted the use of feminine job titles in the national corpus of Polish, at a time when GIL had hardly been promoted and masculine generics represented the norm (Koniuszaniec & Blaszkowska, 2003). This difference was evident regardless of whether the forms concerned were novel (no official feminine form existing) or well-established (official feminine form existing) in the Polish language. The difference found may contribute to a higher visibility of middle-class women than working-class women in a variety of professions.

Study 2

Method

Study 2 examined the dataset of German job titles in Swiss job advertisements, already used in a cross-cultural study published by Hodel et al. (2017). This dataset contained a considerable amount of masculine and gender-inclusive job titles (the dataset for Polish could not be used as it only contained 20 (6%) gender-inclusive job titles). The German dataset included job advertisements taken from the online job search engine careerjet.ch (downloaded in June 2012). This engine provided a categorization of branches of which three branches had been selected, namely health care, restaurants and food services, and constructional steel and metal work. All three branches comprised working- and middle-class professions. For each of the three branches more than 1,000 job advertisements were listed (ranging between 1,440 for constructional steel and metal work and 7,056 for health care). The dataset included 120 randomly selected job advertisements per branch. Two independent raters coded the linguistic form of the job titles as either masculine (e.g., Koch '[male] cook') or gender-inclusive (e.g., Koch/ Köchin '[male] cook/ [female] cook'; for more information on the coding of the linguistic forms, see Hodel et al., 2017).

Social class was coded by two new independent coders, based on the European Socio-economic Classification scheme (ESeC; Wirth & Fischer, 2008), which enables the classification of each profession regarding its socio-economic status into one of nine categories (see Table 2).

Table 2

European Socio-Economic Classification (ESeC) - Categories and Frequencies in Switzerland

Code	English example	Frequency	Social Class
1	Large employers, higher managers and professionals	38	Middle Class
2	Lower managers and professionals, higher supervisory and technicians	86	124
3	Intermediate occupations		Working Class
4	Small employers and self-employed	8	223
5	Small employers and self-employed (agriculture)		
6	Lower supervisors and technicians		
7	Lower sales and service	5	
8	Lower technical	89	
9	Routine	121	

The ESeC categories correspond with the ISCO classification applied in Study 1. In line with Study 1, categories 1 and 2 were coded as middle-class (e.g., managers, higher

technicians) and categories 3 to 9 were coded as working-class professions (e.g., lower technicians, routine workers).

We excluded 20 job titles as they could not be clearly classified as masculine or gender-inclusive and 11 job titles as they could not be clearly classified regarding social class (e.g., internship in healthcare, security and environment). The final dataset consisted of 329 job titles of which 66% were working-class professions (for which 39% used a masculine form and 61% a GIL form) and 34% were middle-class professions (for which 6% used a masculine form and 94% a GIL form).

Results

A logistic regression with social class as the predictor and language use (GIL vs. masculine) as the criterion that tested whether gender-inclusive job titles are related to social class of the profession was significant, $\chi^2(1) = 47.41$, $p < .001$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .19$. As expected, the social class of a profession was a significant predictor of the use of feminine job titles, $B = 2.27$, Wald(1) = 30.02, $p < .001$. The odds ratio of 9.68 indicated that gender-inclusive compared to masculine job titles were used ten times more often for middle-class professions than for working-class professions.

Subsequently, to rule out the possibility that differences in GIL in lower- or middle-class job roles are due to gender segregation, we used the ISCO-19 classification (Swiss National Statistical Office, 2010-2012) and calculated the percentage of women in each profession (see Supplementary Materials, Hodel et al., 2025). A logistic regression with social class as the predictor, percentage of women in each profession as the control variable, and language use (GIL vs. masculine) as the criterion was conducted to test whether gender-inclusive job titles are related to the social class of the profession. The model was significant, $\chi^2(2) = 70.21$, $p < .001$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .286$. Again as predicted, social class of profession was a significant predictor of the use of feminine job titles, $B = 1.63$, Wald(1) = 13.43, $p < .001$, while controlling for the percentage of women in each profession, $B = 0.02$, Wald(1) = 18.83, $p < .001$. The odds ratio of 5.08 indicated that the odds of using gender-inclusive job titles, compared to masculine ones, were five times higher for middle-class professions than for working-class professions.

Discussion

Study 2 documented the social class difference for gender-inclusive job titles in job advertisements in Switzerland, where the use of feminine forms has been well established (Bußmann & Hellinger, 2003) and official GIL regulations have been adopted in many contexts, for example, in job advertisements (Hellinger, 2004). The fact that GIL is used less often for working-class professions in job advertisements may deter women from applying for these positions.

General Discussion

This research provided the first evidence that GIL is used more often for job titles of middle-class than working-class professions in both Polish and German. As our findings are based on two languages and various types of textual data from comparable times, they represent a robust test of the hypothesis that feminine and gender-inclusive job titles are more prevalent for middle-class than working-class professions.

Strengths, Limitations and Future Research

As the social class difference of GIL use has been documented for two grammatical-gender languages, it can most likely be generalized to other grammatical-gender languages. Generalization to natural gender or genderless languages, however, may be limited, as the introduction of gender-inclusive forms in these languages can easily be made through neutralization (in natural gender languages) or by simply avoiding gender references at all (in genderless languages; Sczesny et al., 2016). Future research should therefore investigate whether social class differences can also be found when using other language cues in natural and genderless languages, such as grammatical prominence (e.g., male role nouns more often perceived as agents than female one) or word order (e.g., male role nouns first; for an overview on linguistic gender cues see Formanowicz & Hansen, 2022).

The data used for this research were collected between 1999 and 2012, raising the question of whether the social class difference we found is still observable today. In recent decades, developments in GIL, including new forms of job titles, have taken place in both languages under investigation (e.g., Cieszkowski, 2015; Dargiewicz, 2021). For instance, in German job advertisements, the masculine generic form (e.g., Ingenieur ‘male engineer’) can nowadays be expanded by the abbreviation m/f/d (male/female/diverse) and is recommended by the European Parliament to indicate that the job offer is addressing people of all genders (European Commission, 2008; although this form of job title is classified as gender-inclusive, it fails to reduce male bias (Fatfouta & Sczesny, 2023)).

Do such developments challenge the validity of the social class difference in GIL use we identified? This would be the case if GIL nowadays represents the standard in a speech community, that is, if it were widely accepted and commonly used. Under such conditions, the difference between middle-class and working-class professions should be less pronounced or even eliminated. However, the social acceptance of GIL (and consequently its use) is still rather low in both the countries under investigation. For instance, in current surveys, only 14% of 160 Polish respondents (Ivanová & Kyselová, 2022) and 24% of 30,754 Swiss respondents (Tamedia, 2023) were in favor of GIL. Thus, in both countries, we would still expect to find the social class difference in more recent

datasets. Future research, nevertheless, needs to confirm the social class difference in GFL use, and may also check for cross-cultural variation in levels of acceptance of GIL.

Obviously, legal frameworks and policies that aimed to promote gender-inclusive language across Europe (e.g., Gender-sensitive communication: A guide to non-discriminatory language; [European Institute for Gender Equality, 2020](#)) have not been resounding. Nevertheless, there are ongoing political debates about the representation of sexual and gender minorities in language that have already resulted in adjustments of legal frameworks in some European countries (e.g., the German Civil Status Law granted intersex individuals in Germany the ability to select "diverse" instead of "male" or "female" when indicating their sex in civil status records at registry offices, [Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency, 2018](#)), which might inspire further advancement towards GIL across Europe. Therefore, our findings serve as a starting point for the observation of social class differences in GIL use over time and across languages. They thereby serve as an indicator of the success of language reforms that aim to promote gender equality for both social classes in grammatical-gender languages.

A more complex explanation of the effects of social status on GIL arises from the observation that working-class jobs often display more pronounced gender segregation compared to middle-class occupations ([England et al., 2020](#)). In the present research it was, however, not appropriate to analyze the impact of gender segregation because the datasets used comprised of detailed professions (e.g., psychiatrist for children, physician for internal medicine, physician for anesthesia) and data on gender segregation was only available on an aggregated level (e.g., medical doctors). Future research therefore needs to disentangle the influences of social class and gender segregation on GIL use and explore how the interplay of social class and gender segregation impacts GIL use.

Finally, we proposed that the social class difference in GIL use may be caused by middle-class women who are more engaged in collective action towards gender equality on behalf of their group's interest than working-class women ([Freeman, 1995](#); [Scarborough & Risman, 2020](#)). Thus, middle-class women's collective actions may have greatly impacted the more prevalent use of GIL for their professions. As the aim of the present research was to identify the social class difference but did not test whether this difference is an outcome of collective action, future research should directly test whether women's collective action for GIL depends on their social class. Moreover, the underlying psychological mechanisms of collective action on GIL await further investigation. Besides social class differences in egalitarian values ([Carvacho et al., 2013](#); [Kalmijn & Kraaykamp, 2007](#)) and belief that social change is possible ([Fernández-Ballesteros et al., 2002](#)), system-based anger ([Jost et al., 2017](#)) or identification with women as a group ([Radke et al., 2016](#)) might also contribute to the difference in the promotion of GIL by middle- and working-class professions.

Practical Implications

The successful implementation of GIL plays an important role in achieving gender diversity as such reforms aim to reduce androcentrism (Bailey et al., 2019). By creating a psychologically safe workplace (Rosenberger & Claypool, 2023; Stout & Dasgupta, 2011), GIL may thereby contribute to improving organizational effectiveness (e.g., Ely & Thomas, 2020). However, the fact that GIL is less common for working-class than middle-class professions indicates that this reform is not universal across all speech-communities, potentially limiting working-class women's professional opportunities. Importantly, although working-class women may prefer the status quo, they would nevertheless profit from a successful implementation of GIL in various ways, for instance, by becoming more visible (Stahlberg et al., 2001) and by increasing their job opportunities (Bem & Bem, 1973; Yavorsky, 2019).

Given that GIL use is more common for middle-class professions than for working-class professions, organizations and policymakers need to focus on promoting GIL within working-class communities and professions. This could involve revising language used in official documents, educational materials, and workplace communications to ensure that GIL is normalized and actively encouraged across all social strata. For instance, human resource departments who recognize the lack of GIL use in working-class professions may tailor job advertisements for these professions accordingly to attract a more diverse pool of applicants. GIL will thereby contribute to the reduction of masculine defaults (Cheryan & Markus, 2020) and contribute to workplace cultures towards greater equality and inclusivity.

Conclusions

Social class has received limited attention from linguists and social psychologists in past research and turned out to be an intriguing yet underexplored factor in the present research. This highlights the importance of taking a closer look at the promotion of GIL, as its implementation has proven to be more successful for middle- than for working-class professions. To increase the successful implementation of GIL, gender equality must be perceived as important and achievable in working-class communities. Fostering egalitarian values and beliefs in successful social change in working-class communities might thus provide a more impactful means of implementing GIL and other gender equality initiatives. In doing so, working-class women would also profit from GIL language reforms and have greater access to more diverse job opportunities in the future.

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Ethics Statement: This research analyzed openly available archival data; therefore, no ethical approval was needed.

Data Availability: The datasets of the studies are openly available at Open Science Framework (see Hodel et al., 2025).

Supplementary Materials

The Supplementary Materials contain the datasets of Study 1 and Study 2, and the SPSS syntax files (see Hodel et al., 2025).

Index of Supplementary Materials

Hodel, L., Formanowicz, M., Pietraszkiewicz, A., & Sczesny, S. (2025). *Supplementary materials to "The role of social class in the use of gender-inclusive language: An analysis of Polish and German job titles"* [Data, Code]. OSF. <https://osf.io/kc2ev>

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