Queer Science Event
Autonomous Queer Student Representation Groups

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IS *THEY* LESS BIASED THAN *HE*?

HOW GERMAN SPEAKERS PROCESS GENERIC SINGULAR PRONOUNS
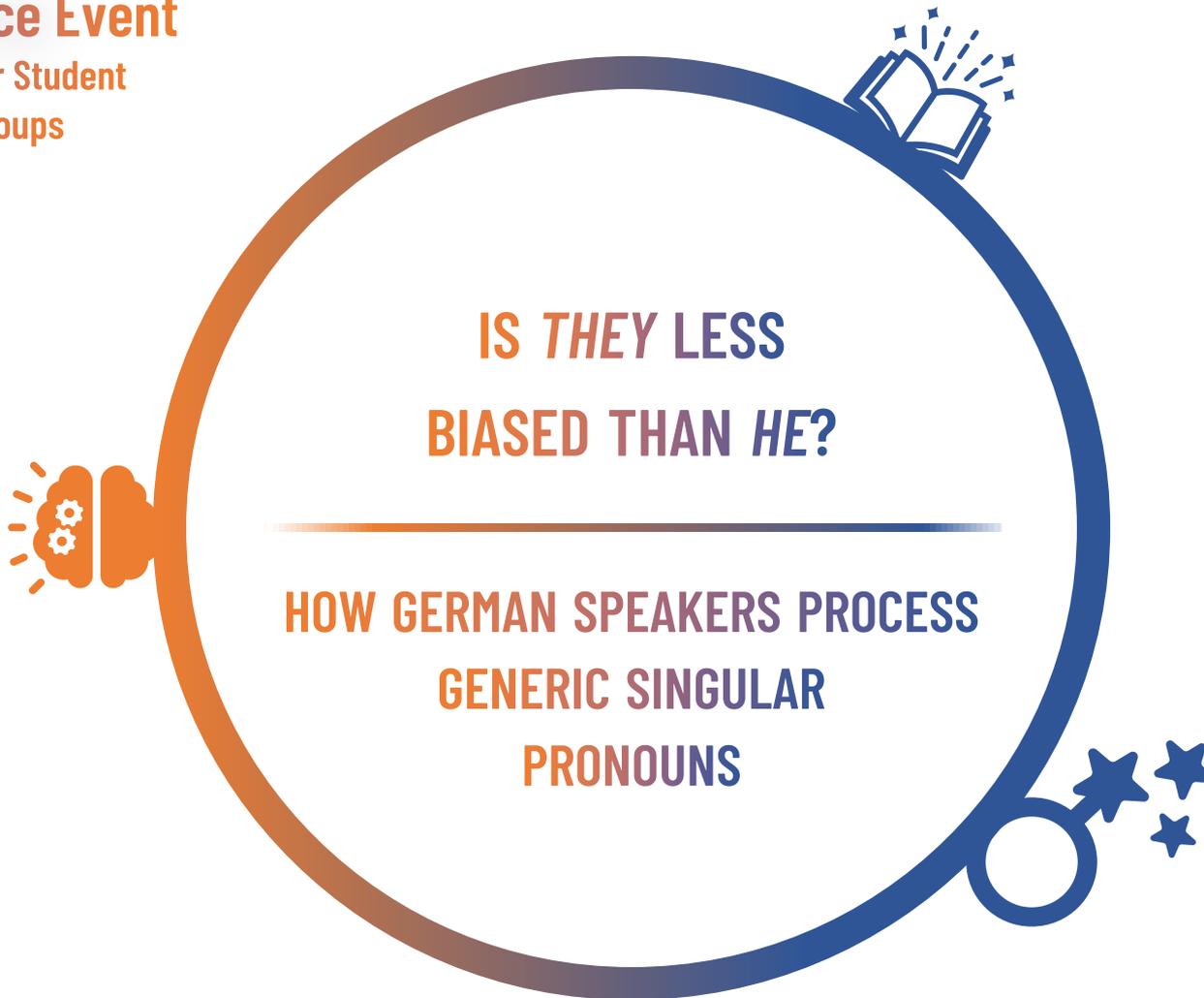
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2025-06-10

GERMAN SLIDES
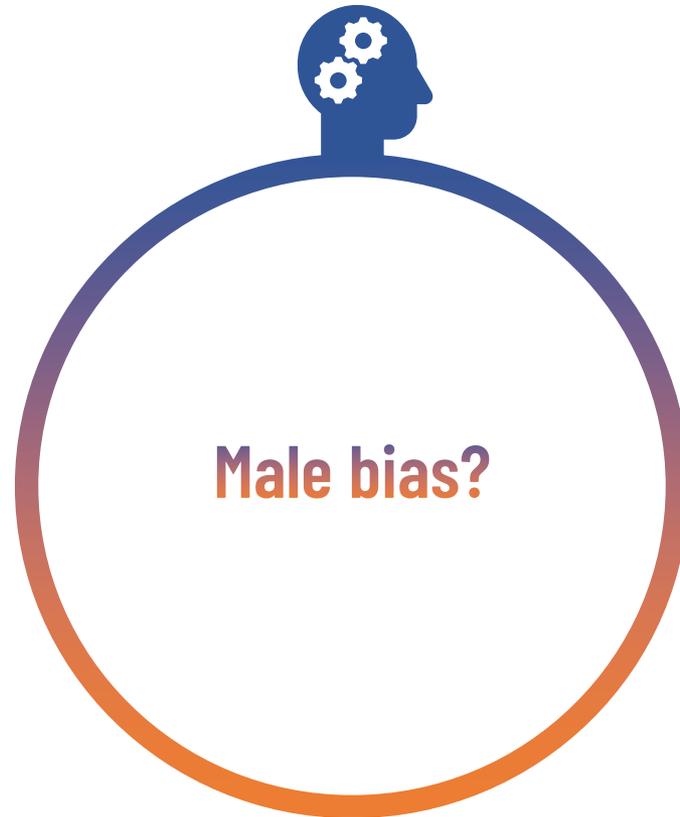
Male bias?

Every student must submit his assignments by the end of next week.

Every student must submit **his** assignments by the end of next week.

his or her

their

etc.

Pronouns

Every student must submit his assignments by the end of next week.

his or her
their
etc.

Role nouns

Ein typischer Student kommt nie zu spät zur Vorlesung.

... StudentIn
... studierende Person
... etc.

The generic masculine

... ignores non-male referents, putting them at a **disadvantage**.

... is not gender-specific and therefore **equally** includes all referents.

Braun et al. 2005: 1, 3–4; Gabriel et al. 2008: 206–207; Rothmund & Scheele 2004: 40–41; Martyna 1980

Is the generic masculine really gender-neutral?

There is a growing body of research on the male bias of pronouns and role nouns in various languages.

for example:
- Moulton et al. 1978   English
- MacKay & Fulkerson 1979   English
- Braun et al. 2005   German
- Rothmund & Scheele 2004   German
- Gabriel et al. 2008   English, German, French

What about crosslinguistic bias?

German learners of English

1. Can we replicate a male bias for generic *his*?

Generic masculine

On **his** first day at school, a pupil is usually very nervous.

Generic singular they

On **their**$_1$ first day at school, a pupil is usually very nervous.

Specific singular they

On **their**$_2$ first day at school, Luca was very nervous.

Plural they

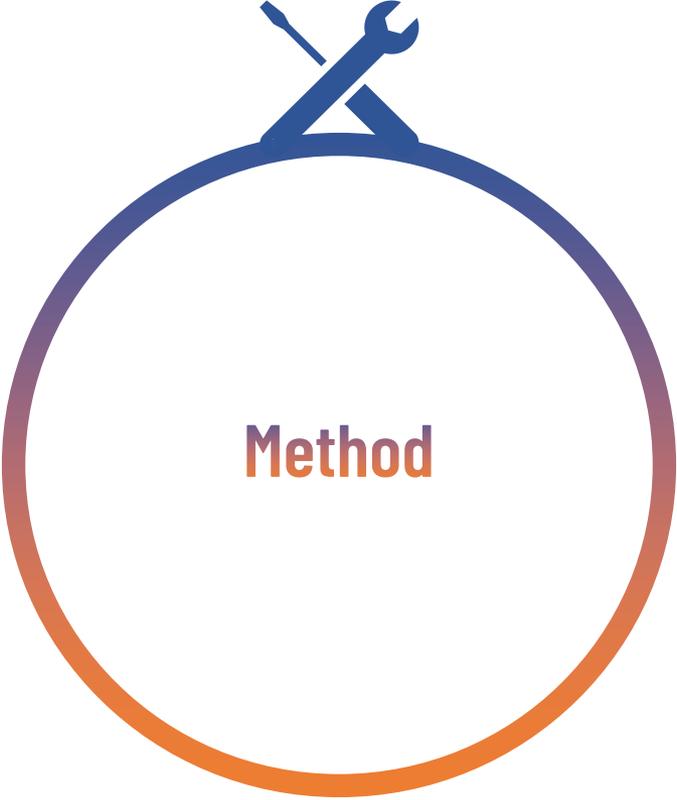On **their**$_3$ first day at school, the pupils were very nervous.

cf. Konnelly et al. 2023

What about crosslinguistic bias?

German learners of English

1. Can we replicate a male bias for generic *his*?
2. Do we also find a male bias for generic *their*?
3. Will the male bias for *their* be weaker than for *his*?

Method

The short story approach

Bitte erfinden Sie passend zum folgenden Thema eine kurze Geschichte (ca. 10 Sätze) über eine <u>fiktive</u> Figur (schreiben Sie nicht über sich selbst):

"On his first day at school, a pupil is usually very nervous."

based on Moulton et al. 1978; see Scheutz et al. 2004 on morphological endings

The short story approach

Bitte erfinden Sie passend zum folgenden Thema eine kurze Geschichte (ca. 10 Sätze) über eine <u>fiktive</u> Figur (schreiben Sie nicht über sich selbst):

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The short story approach

Bitte geben Sie ihrer fiktiven Figur einen Namen. Falls Sie Ihrer Figur bereits einen Namen gegeben haben, geben Sie ihn hier bitte erneut an.

Name Ihrer fiktiven Figur:
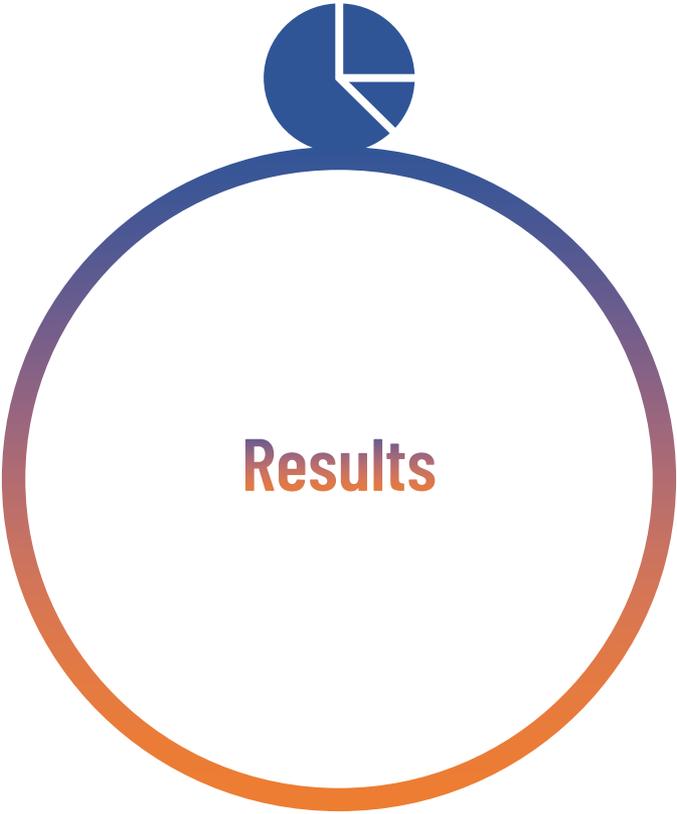
based on Moulton et al. 1978

Participant demographics   2025 study

- **46** of 53 participants
- **39** female, **7** male
- age **18–60** $\bar{x} = 27.49$, $s_x = 8.94$
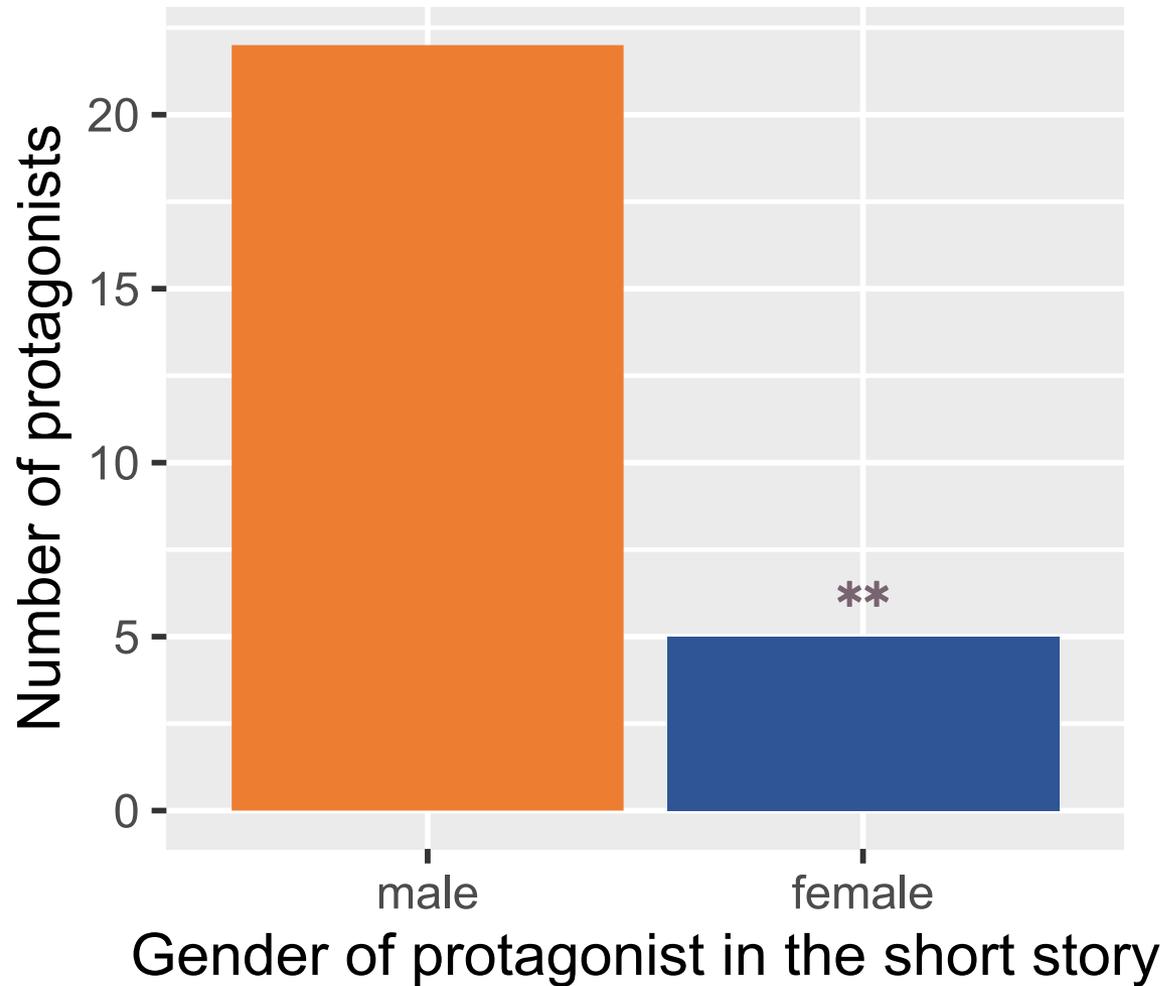- onset of English learning $\bar{x}$ = **8.37** years $s_x = 2.44$

Statistical modeling

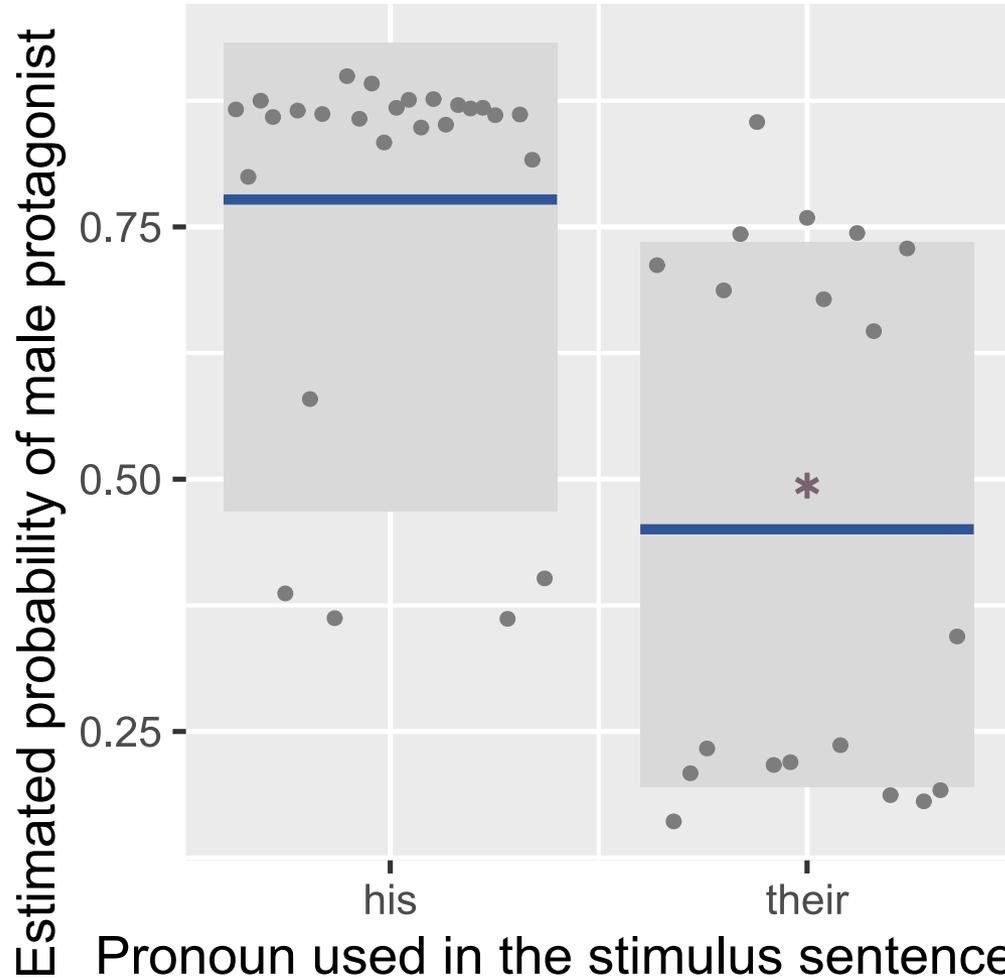GENDER OF PROTAGONIST ~ PRONOUN IN SENTENCE +

AGE OF PARTICIPANT +

GENDER OF PARTICIPANT +

ADDITIONAL FIRST LANGUAGE +

AGE OF ENGLISH ACQUISITION +

TIME SPENT ABROAD

Results

On **his** first day at school, …

Gender in English and German

English   Semantic gender system

the woman   →   *she*   feminine

the man   →   *he*   masculine

the table, the newspaper, the car   →   *it*   neuter

German   Morphosyntactic gender system

die Frau   fem,   *der Mann*   masc,   but also:

der Tisch   masc,   *die Zeitung*   fem,   *das Auto*   neuter

Braun et al. 2005: 2–3; Irmen & Roßberg 2006: 157–158; Scheutz et al. 2004: 563–564

Weaker link between grammatical and referent gender?

German learners of English

4. Compared to English, the male bias of the German generic masculine might be weaker.

Participant demographics   2018 study

- **78** of 107 participants
- **61** female, **15** male, **1** genderfluid, **1** agender
- **age 17–27** $\bar{x} = 20$, $s_x = 1.87$
- **English learners for $\bar{x} = $ 8 years** $s_x = 1.93$

The short story approach

Bitte erfinden Sie passend zum folgenden Thema eine kurze Geschichte (ca. 10 Sätze) über eine <u>fiktive</u> Figur (schreiben Sie nicht über sich selbst):

"On his first day at school, a pupil is usually very nervous."

based on Moulton et al. 1978; see Scheutz et al. 2004 on morphological endings
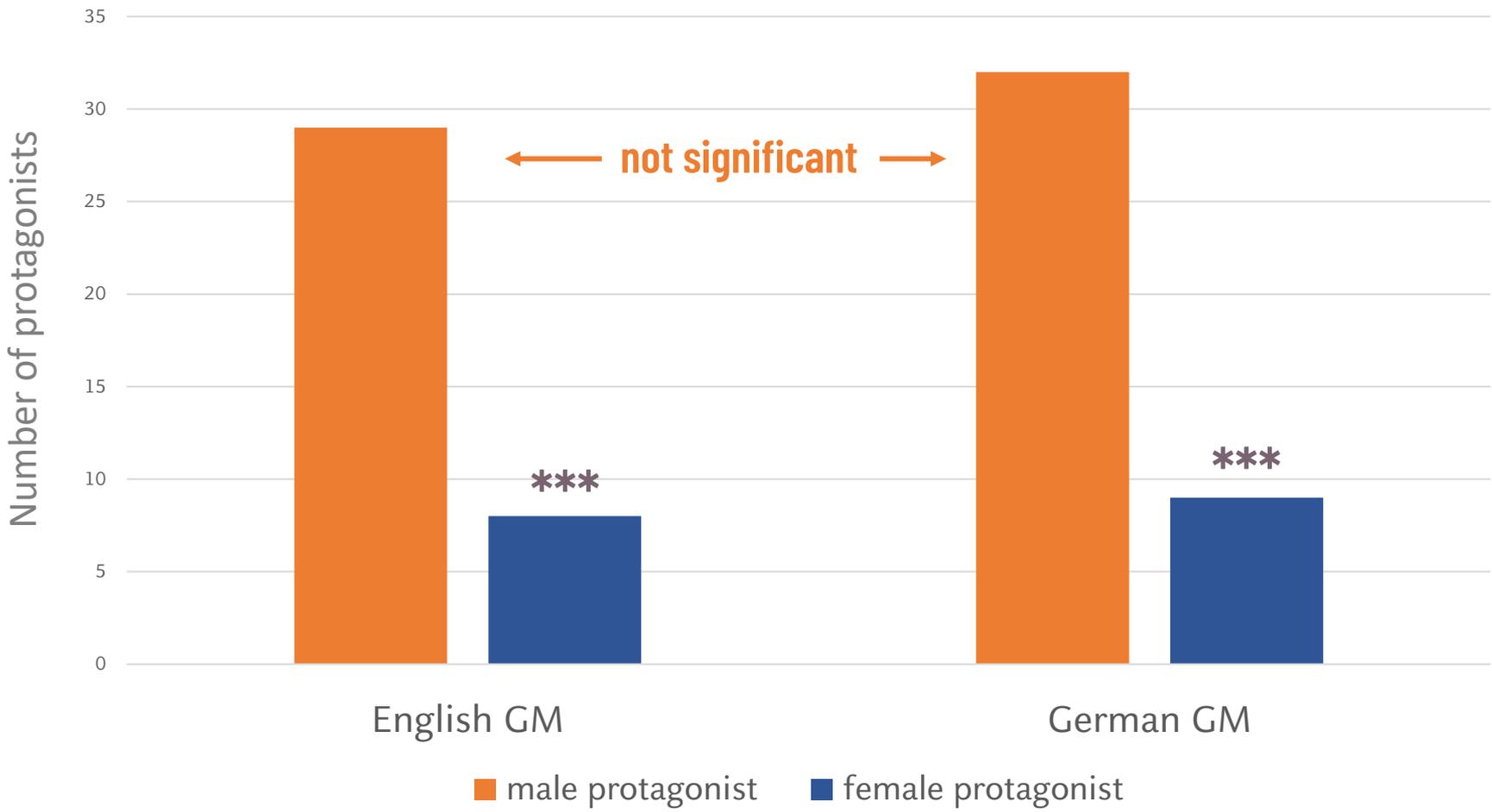
The short story approach

Bitte erfinden Sie passend zum folgenden Thema eine kurze Geschichte (ca. 10 Sätze) über eine <u>fiktive</u> Figur (schreiben Sie nicht über sich selbst):

"Am ersten Schultag ist ein Schüler für gewöhnlich sehr nervös."

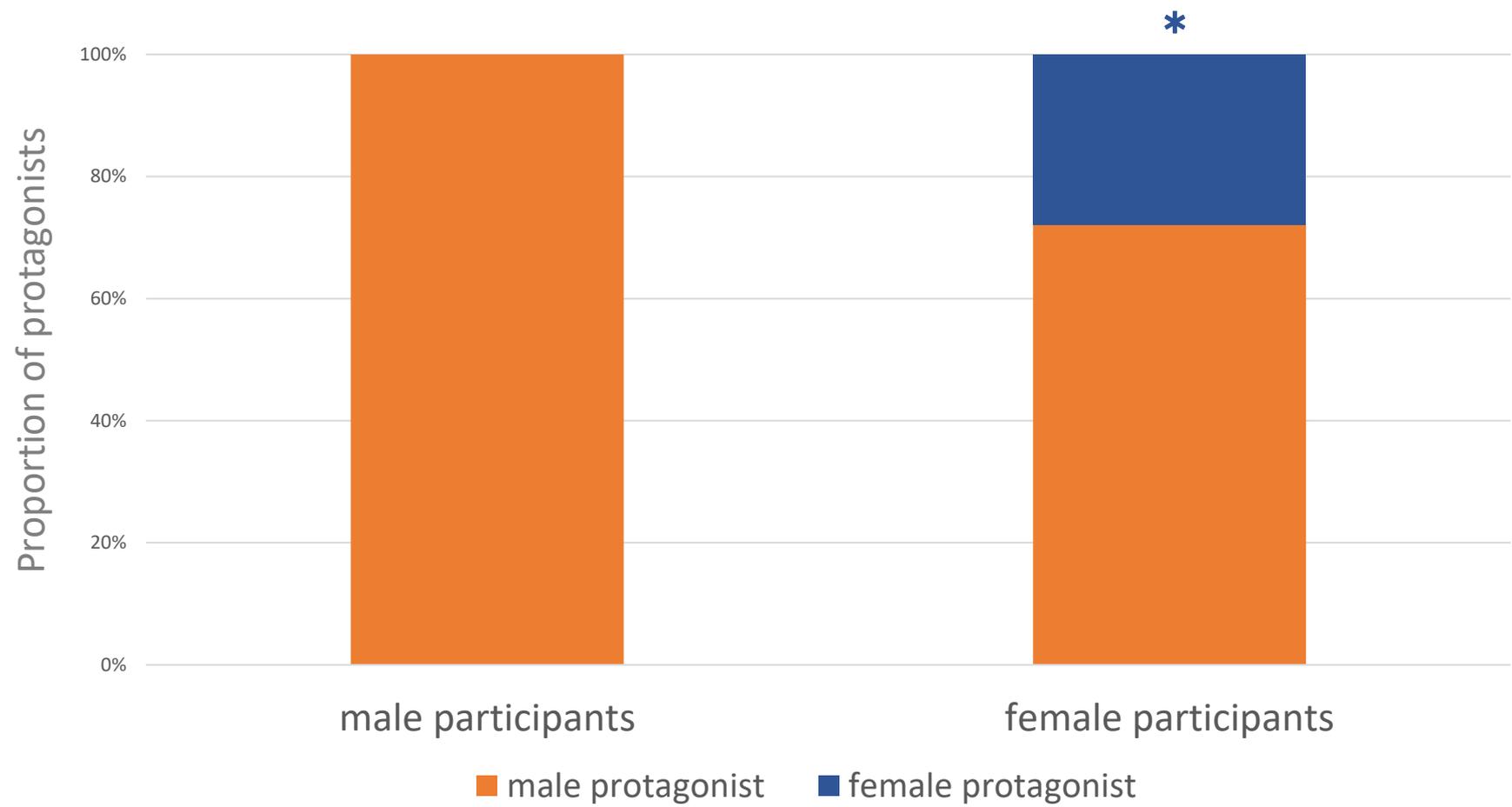based on Moulton et al. 1978; see Scheutz et al. 2004 on morphological endings

Generic masculines <u>can</u> be understood as neutral …

"On his first day at school, a pupil is usually very nervous."

On his first day at school, a pupil is usually very nervous. He will double check his bag, he will make sure nothing is out of line. And Beth thought she would do all that. She thought she would barely be able to sleep, thinking about what might

"Am ersten Schultag ist ein Schüler für gewöhnlich sehr nervös."

Das liegt nicht nur daran, dass er sich das erste Mal in einem ungewohnten Umfeld befindet, sondern auch an der Konfrontation mit vielen fremden Dingen. Desshalb war Emma an ihrem ersten Schultag auch nicht besonders gut gelaunt. Schon

... but often aren't.

"On his first day at school, a pupil is usually very nervous."

He doesn't know what lies ahead of him and what to expect. The first challenge is physically finding his way around: Which class is in which building and how does he find the required building. Then there is the feeling of being lost and alone if he doesn't know anyone there. For outgoing pupils this is less of a problem, since he or she is quite willing to take the initiative and engage a fellow pupil in conversation. The next issue is coming to

"On his first day at school, a pupil is usually very nervous."

She was very nervous because she didn't know anyone. She wasn't searching friends. She saw in a class a handsome guy and he

... but often aren't.

1. Please make up a story in English (ca. 10 sentences) about <u>a fictional character</u> who fits the following theme (please do not write about yourself):

her
"On his first day at school, a pupil is usually very nervous."

She doesn't know anybody, so she's worried about making friends and blending in. She's always

Implications

‣ generic masculine overwrites self-imagery effect

‣ crosslinguistic support, gender bias transfer

‣ grammatical and referent gender closely connected

‣ our 2025 study controls for a general people = male bias

‣ supports the call for more inclusive language

MacKay & Fulkerson 1979: 671; Silveira 1980; Henley 1989: 72; Rothmund & Scheele 2004: 50

Previous research

Our findings align with previous research finding a male bias of pronouns and role nouns in various languages.

for example:
- Moulton et al. 1978   English
- MacKay & Fulkerson 1979   English
- Braun et al. 2005   German
- Rothmund & Scheele 2004   German
- Gabriel et al. 2008   English, German, French

What do we need next?

‣ studies with English native speakers as direct comparison

‣ data on effects of other forms, like *his or her*
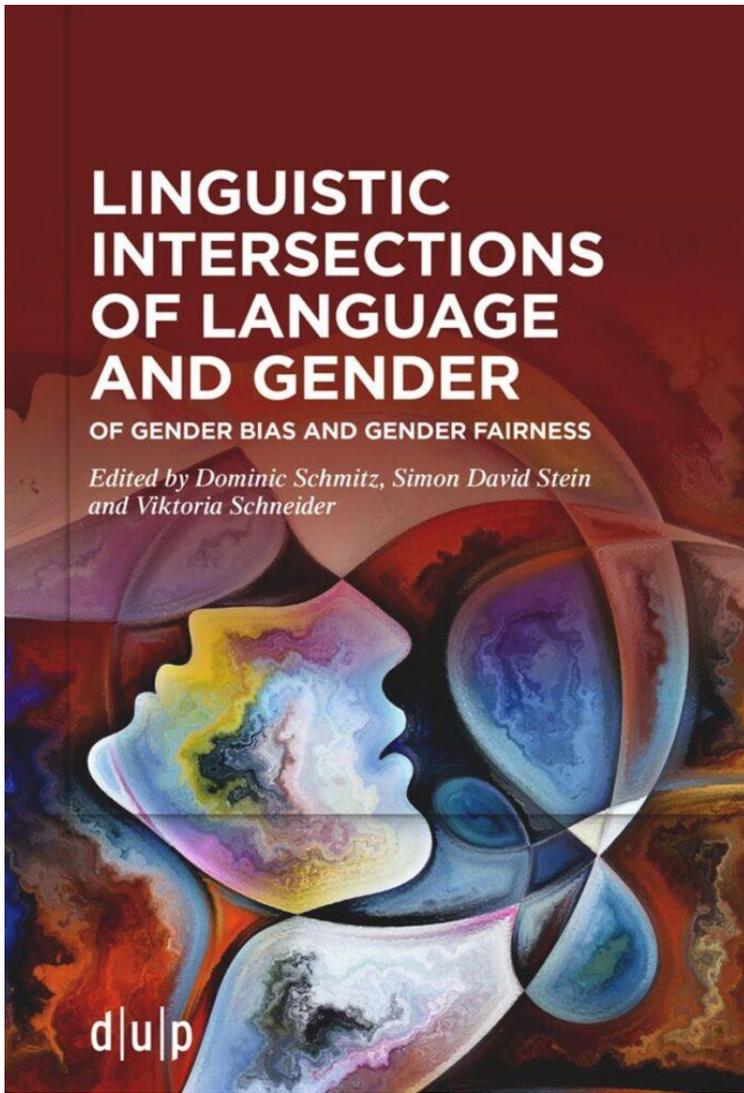
‣ data on neopronouns like ze/hir, fae/faer, ey/em

Conclusion

The takeaway

**Generic *he* is not gender-neutral.
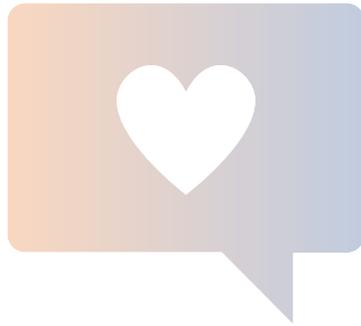Seems like singular *they* does a better job.**

This study and more:

THANK YOU

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