

Tips for parents

- › Explain to language learners what grammatical gender is and point out the differences between languages.
- › Bear in mind that bilingual and multilingual learners may need more help and possibly more time for acquiring grammatical gender in German.
- › Use nouns in German together with articles to facilitate the acquisition of grammatical gender.
- › Be aware of possible gender mixing in various languages by bilingual and multilingual learners.
- › Employ gender-fair language to address all people with equal respect.
- › Take advantage of counselling and support services when needed!



No. 6 – Achieving bilingualism Language and Gender

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Achieving bilingualism Language and Gender

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Grammatical gender across languages

Grammatical gender differs across languages. For example, the word for **sun** is feminine in German “die Sonne”, masculine in French “le soleil” and neuter in Russian “солнце”. Why is it so?

Many languages have grammatical gender, while others do not have it at all. For example, French and Spanish have two genders in the singular, feminine and masculine, while Romanian and Russian have three genders: feminine, masculine, neuter. English generally has no grammatical gender for nouns, only for pronouns, for example **she** and **he**. Turkish has no grammatical gender on either nouns or pronouns. Thus, in Turkish, the personal pronoun **o** “he/she/it” can refer to a man, woman, or an object.

The German language has three grammatical genders, reflected by three corresponding articles in the singular: **die** for feminine nouns e. g. **die Frau** “the woman”/ **die Tasche** “the bag”, **der** for masculine nouns e. g. **der Mann** “the man”/ **der Tisch** “the table”, and **das** for neuter nouns e. g. **das Kind** “the child”/ **das Dach** “the roof”.



[1] The word Joghurt is either masculine or neuter in Standard German, but in some dialects it is feminine.



Gender in multilingual acquisition

Many multilingual children and learners of German make mistakes in grammatical gender. Such mistakes are common in language acquisition. Monolingual children also need years to acquire grammatical gender. Why is it so?

In German, it is not always clear to which grammatical gender a noun belongs. For example, is the word for **Joghurt** feminine (die Joghurt), masculine (der Joghurt) or neuter (das Joghurt)? And why is **die Gabel** “fork” feminine, **das Messer** “knife” neuter and **der Löffel** “spoon” masculine? Even in dialects there is sometimes a difference. For example, in Bavarian, it is **der Butter** instead of **die Butter** for “butter” and **der Radio** instead of **das Radio** for “radio”. In many cases gender assignment must be learnt by heart.

Therefore, it is important to provide children and adult learners with information on grammatical gender from early on in their learning process. Pay attention to using nouns with the corresponding articles in German. You can also point out the differences between German and other languages to avoid gender mixing across languages.

[2] The references (Klein, 2022; Steriopolu & Schütze, to appear) are available from bivem.leibniz-zas.de/de/service-transfer/flyerreihe

Gender-fair language

What are gender-fair and gender-inclusive grammatical forms in German that help to address people with equal respect and provide more visibility of people of any gender?

Recent experimental studies in linguistics^[2] have shown that in German nouns for occupations and social roles, the feminine grammatical form is a good gender-fair option, because it can refer to people of any gender, e. g. **die Lehrkraft** “the teacher”/ **die Kontaktperson** “the contact person”. In contrast, the so-called “generic masculine” form, e. g. **der Lehrer** “the teacher”/ **der Kontakt** “the contact”, is viewed by some people as having gender bias, which means addressing primarily men instead of people of all genders.

To avoid gender bias in German, it is important to use gender-inclusive nouns for occupations and social roles. Such nouns have the feminine grammatical form in German, but they do not refer to the gender of an individual. These nouns often end in **-kraft**, **-hilfe** or **-person**, e. g. **die Rettungskraft** “the rescue worker”, **die Bürohilfe** “the office employee”, **die Betreuungsperson** “the caregiver”.

