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Flugmaðurinn, sem er kona, er ófrísk(ur?)
"The flightman, who is a woman, is pregnant"
(='The female pilot is pregnant').
Barriers in the Icelandic system of nouns
denoting human beings¹

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1. Icelandic nouns denoting human beings

This article examines the expression of natural gender in Icelandic nouns denoting human beings. Particular attention will be paid to the system's symmetry with regards to nouns denoting women and men.² Our society consists more or less exactly of half women and half men. One would therefore assume that systems for terms denoting persons would also be symmetrically organised. Yet this assumption could not be further from the truth, and not just in single isolated cases, but in many languages: I will attempt to show that Icelandic has numerous methods for referring to women, but also many barriers and idiosyncrasies. This is the case not only for occupational titles traditionally dominated by men (such as *flugmaður* 'pilot'), but also for those where the distribution is virtually equal between the sexes. The opportunities provided by the language as a system – e.g. **flugkona* 'flight woman' = 'female pilot' – remain unused

¹This paper would not have been possible without the help of the following Icelanders, to whom I wish to express my sincere thanks: Anna Björk Nikulásdóttir, Ásdís Egilsdóttir, Guðrún Kvaran, Helga Kress, Kolbrún Sigurðardóttir, Óskar Bjarnason, Steinfjór Sigurðsson and Valgerður Bragadóttir. I also thank Janet Duke for the English translation – A more in-depth treatment of this subject is provided in Nübling (forthcoming).

²Grönberg (1995) and (forthcoming) and Bonner (1999) provide a discussion of the generic masculine. Regarding Faroese, see Didriksen (1986), (1989), (1994), and Henriksen (1998).

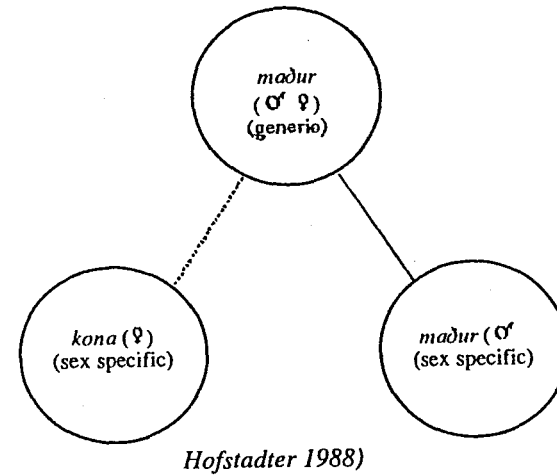
for the most part. The various referential asymmetries reveal a surprisingly sexist or at least archaic view of women. I will then briefly document that German significantly expanded its morphological system for justified forms as a result of language critique.

My research into reference to natural gender in Icelandic nouns led to the surprising finding that the topic has rarely been the subject of linguistic attention. Even larger grammars or language descriptions refuse to dedicate space to the matter. During a stay in Iceland I had to rely on information from Icelanders. Their views were sometimes controversial, but generally led to the following conclusions. First of all it should be noted that Icelandic has three genders which have a strong morphological presence, meaning they are marked in many words in both the singular and plural. In an attempt to make matters more clear, in this paper I have added the grammatical gender in brackets (f., m., n.) and also the natural gender (♂/♀). Particularly literal and stylistically problematic English translations are written with double quotation marks, stylistically acceptable ones with single quotation marks.

2. Referential Asymmetry as a Basic Principle

The philosopher and author Douglas Hofstadter, who had no formal linguistic training, remarks on this asymmetry in his witty and original observations. He noted that many generic terms are often homophone with the sex-specific male term, while this is not the case for the female example. Hofstadter refers somewhat jokingly to this referential asymmetry as "the slippery slope of sexism".

FIGURE 1: "The slippery slope of sexism" (based on Douglas



This asymmetry is omnipresent in Icelandic: The general word for 'person' *maður* (m.) is – much like English *man* and French *l'homme* – identical to the word for 'man'. Fig. 2 illustrates this characteristic asymmetrical weighting:

FIGURE 2: Referential asymmetry of Icelandic *maður* (sg.)³

<i>maður</i> (m.) 'person'		generic (?)
<i>kona</i> (f./♀) 'woman'	<i>maður</i> (m./♂) 'man'	sex-specific
<i>kvenmaður</i> (m./♀) (often used)	<i>karlmaður</i> (m./♂) (rarely used - because of <i>maður</i>)	

Considering comparable constellations in other languages, it is unlikely that a truly generic use of *maður* exists, but this question requires further investigation in the case of Icelandic. In German, studies have shown that even *Mensch*, the official generic word for human being, refers more

³Maður is also the indefinite personal pronoun 'one'.

strongly to men than to women. *Menschen* may by all means have wives, but not husbands (Pusch 1984).

In addition to the more common natural gender specification using natural-gender-inherent *kona* 'woman' and *maður* 'man',⁴ Icelandic can also use the prefix *kven-* to refer to women and *karl-* to refer to men. In both cases, however, the basis is formed using *-maður*: *kvenmaður* 'woman' vs. *karlmaður* 'man'. This formally symmetrical compounding procedure differs in usage, however: *kvenmaður* is the normal term for 'woman' and is as such much more common and stylistically more generic than *karlmaður*, most likely because the simple term *maður* accomplishes this task.⁵

In accordance with the Icelandic system of strict grammatical gender agreement, words which end in *-maður* (m.) such as *flugmaður* (m.) 'pilot' or *heimildarmaður* 'informant', are given the pronoun *hann* 'he'. This unfortunate situation has led to the development of avoidance strategies using the relative clause *sem er kona* 'who is a woman', if the sex of the referent is unknown:

heimildarmaðurinn (m./♂/♀), *sem var kona* (f./♀), *sagði* ... → *hún* (f./♀)
 "the informant (m./♂/♀), who was a woman (f./♀), said ... → she (♀)

And yet when men are referred to, one need not go to any trouble: It is completely acceptable to say *heimildarmaðurinn* (m.) *var skeggjáður* (m.) 'the informant had a beard', in which case the specification of natural gender is spared through the relative clause **sem er karlmaður*. I

⁴This opposition is expressed in the titles of Jón Thoroddsen's novels "Maður og kona" 'Man and Woman'. To what extent the order in titles and pair forms such as these men are named before women could only be investigated using a handful of examples (e.g. "Piltur og stúlka" 'Boy and Girl' from the same author), but this does not appear to be different from German, where the principle "man before woman" is strictly adhered to. The only exception is the German address "Sehr geehrte Damen und Herren", which in Icelandic is "Herrar msnir og frúr", literally 'Gentlemen and Ladies'.

⁵When these compounds are used in forming other words, however, they achieve a referential symmetry. These compounds are often found in cases where English would use female and male, such as *kvenmannsnöfn/karlmannsnöfn* 'female/male personal names', a case with complete parallelism.

have chosen *heimildarmaður* as an example, because this term is more balanced in terms of social gender than *flugmaður* (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 3: Referential asymmetry of Icelandic *heimildarmaður* 'informant'

<i>heimildarmaður</i> (m./♂/♀ (?)) 'informant'	
---- (f./♀) *heimildarkona (f./♀) → <i>heimildarmaðurinn sem er kona</i> (<i>kvenkyns heimildarmaður</i>)	<i>heimildarmaður</i> (m./♂) → * <i>heimildarmaðurinn sem er karl(maður)</i> (* <i>karlkyns heimildarmaður</i>)

The building of compounds such as **heimildarkona* and **flugkona* is blocked, but not as a principle: There are a large number of such compounds (mostly pairs) with other first elements such as *búðarkona* 'saleswoman', *búðarmaður* 'salesman'. Yet there is a real gap for the term for 'pilot', a morphological blockade: Should the term refer to one of few women in this profession, the identification of sex must be provided syntactically, often in a relative clause: *flugmaðurinn* (m./♂/♀), *sem er kona* (f./♀). The prototypical frame for such a syntagma is a story about an unidentified female pilot, who is said to be pregnant:

flugmaðurinn (m./♂/♀), *sem ég sá ígær*, *var kona* (f./♀),
 "the flightman, whom I saw yesterday, was a woman,
 sem var ófrísk(ur) (f./m.)
 who was pregnant"

→ 'The pilot, whom I saw yesterday, was pregnant'.

The predicative adjective *ófrísk* (f.) 'pregnant' agrees with *kona* (f.), but the masculine adjective *ófrískur* would also be acceptable because it refers to *flugmaður* (m.). This is a case where my informants disagreed. I do not intend to elaborate on the topic of gender and sex (natural gender) agreement of adjectives and pronouns, as I only intend to focus on the

possibilities for expressing the natural gender.⁶ In the following section I have structured the strategies for expressing natural gender and systematically examine their results in Icelandic.

3. Methods of expressing natural gender

It is a well-known linguistic fact that the degree of fusion of information in an expression reflects the relevance and frequency, which the referent has for us or our culture. There are three basic methods of expression: lexical, morphological, and syntactic (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 4: Strategies for the expression of information

lexical	<----->	morphological	<----->	syntactic
+ RELEVANT				- RELEVANT
+ FREQUENT				- FREQUENT
FUSION (BREVITY OF EXPRESSION)				EXPANSION (LENGTH OF EXPRESSION)
LOWER COMPETENCE DEMANDS				HIGHER COMPETENCE DEMANDS
HIGHER COMPETENCE DEMANDS				LOWER COMPETENCE DEMANDS
<i>dóttir/sonur</i>		<i>X-kona/-maður</i>		<i>kvenkyns X/karlkyns X</i>
<i>móðir/faðir</i>		<i>kven-X/karl-X</i>		(attributive)
		<i>X-ynja</i>		<i>X, sem er kona</i>
				(relative clause) →

All languages with morphology use this spectrum for economic reasons: if we were forced to use an extra lexeme or simplex for all bundles of information, it would place much too severe demands on our memory. We therefore use a combination principle for expressing concepts, choosing

⁶It should be noted that all examples quoted here refer to situations in which the natural gender of the referent is unknown until that point. When speakers have been discussing a particular woman, then the predicative reference using a masculine noun does not present a problem: *hún (f./♀) var flugmaðurinn (m.)* 'She was the pilot'.

either the shorter morphological or longer syntactic variety. The use of this scaleable spectrum reflects our basic view of the world.

3.1 Lexical specification of natural gender (sex-inherent simplexes)

In many languages such as Icelandic, the lexical method of expressing natural gender is dominant among the very important and frequently-used kinship terms (such as *mother/father – móðir/faðir*, *daughter/son – dóttir/sonur*, *sister/brother – systir/bróðir*). This principle is particularly true in Icelandic, as it also applies to sea-dwelling animals, especially relevant in a culture in which the fishing industry plays a major role: *selur* (m./♂) 'seal' is also referred to using the terms *brimill* (male seal) (m./♂) and *urta* (female seal) (f./♀), and *fiskur* (m./♂) 'fish' can be expressed using *hængur* (male salmon) (m./♂) and *hrygna* (female salmon) (f./♀). Because the lexical expression of natural gender operates with completely different expressions, as long as there are no lexical gaps, this method is symmetrical, meaning the expression of one natural gender is not derived from the other.

3.2 Morphological natural gender specification (compounds and derivation): *-kona/-maður*, *kven-/karl-*, and *-ynja*

The opportunities and restrictions presented by various methods of morphological specification of natural gender in Icelandic have not been researched and can only be sketched briefly here.

3.2.1 Compounds using *-kona/-maður*

The *-kona/-maður* principle is based on substitution, meaning that most primary words ending in *-maður* also end in *-kona*; this means that the female form is, (at least formally) not based on the male: *eiginmaður* 'husband' – *eiginkona* 'wife'. This compounding technique, in itself symmetrical, is only applied to a small portion of the numerous *-maður* compounds, meaning that only a few compounds ending in *-maður* are

equivalent to those ending in *-kona*.⁷ My questioning soon revealed a certain principle, namely that this pairing method is generally applied to workaday terms for persons in professions associated with manual labour and lower social status. The higher the status of a particular profession, the fewer women active in this profession, the more asymmetrical the method becomes.⁸

<i>eiginmaður - eiginkona</i>	'husband - wife',
<i>þróttamaður - þróttakona</i>	'male athlete - female athlete',
<i>kaupamaður - kaupakona</i>	'male day-labourer - female day-lab.',
<i>verkamaður - verkakona</i>	'male factory worker - female factory worker',
<i>búðarmaður - búðarkona</i>	'male salesperson - female salesperson',
<i>afgreiðslumaður - afgreiðslukona</i>	'male cashier - female cashier',
<i>námsmaður - námskona</i>	'male student - female student',
!! <i>þingmaður</i> (- <i>*þingkona</i>)	'male and female Member of Parliament'.

In the particular case of *þingmaður*, 'Member of Parliament', the use of an analogous **þingkona* is forbidden. Even the candidates on the Women's List (*kvennalisti*) were forced to refer to themselves as "thingmen". This led to protests, however. The conflict demonstrates that compounds with *-maður* are not really generic, and refer more to men than to humankind.

⁷Vice versa there exist - and much less frequently! - compounds ending in *-kona* without a corresponding male form ending in *-maður*, such as *bóndakona* (f.♀) 'female farmer' vs. *bóndi* 'farmer' or *leikkona* 'actress' vs. *leikari* 'male actor' (*leikmaður* means 'sportsman'). As the *bóndakona* case illustrates, the meaning consistency of *-kona* is restricted in that it may sometimes denote a wife (such as *lækniskona* 'doctor's wife'). - Drastic sex-specific asymmetries are apparent in the terms *gleðikona* and *gleðimaður*: 'pleasure girl, prostitute' vs. 'happy man'. Lexicalisation has taken place in a manner typical for many languages, in that the feminine form became sexually pejorative.

⁸For more on this principle, see the investigation of Swedish *-man* and *-kvinna* from Himanen (1990).

FIGURE 5: The referential asymmetry from *þingmaður*

<i>þingmaður</i> (m./♂/♀???) 'MP'	
<i>þingmaður</i> (m./♀???) 'female MP' (* <i>þingkona</i> (f./♀))	<i>þingmaður</i> (m./♂) 'male MP'

According to my information, a feminist linguistic debate was sparked by the *þingmaður* example alone. The gender specification demanded by **þingkona* is a stark contrast to the goal of the women's movement through the late seventies, which called for the abolishment of all existing feminine nouns in order to initiate the neutralisation of all valid masculine nouns denoting human beings. The continental Scandinavian languages probably served as a model here, which went through the process on a completely different basis, namely common gender (*utrum*). Examples of the common Icelandic feminine forms are:

BEFORE		→	NOW
<i>kaupkona</i> (f.)	'businesswoman'	→	<i>kaupmaður</i> (m.)
<i>kennslukona</i> (f.)	'female teacher'	→	<i>kennari</i> (m.)
<i>hjúkrunarkona</i> (f.)	'female nurse'	→	<i>hjúkrunarfræðingur</i> (m.)
<i>skólástýra</i> (f.)	'female school principal'	→	<i>skólástjóri</i> (m.)

The older expressions are now obsolete, and some are even pejorative. They were all replaced by the masculine forms. While the singularity of *þingmaður* was and continues to be the focus of criticism, neither *flugmaður* 'pilot' nor *heimildarmaður* 'informant' nor *kaupmaður* 'businessman' were affected. In each of these cases the building of a compound using *-kona* is blocked, meaning one must divert to a syntactic method using the attributive *kvenkyns* or the relative clause *sem er kona*.⁹

⁹This becomes even clearer in the case of the former and only word for 'nurse' *hjúkrunarkona* 'care woman'. As the number of male nurses was on the rise, men were not collectively referred to as *hjúkrunarkona* (f.) (as is the case in Sweden and Denmark); the analogous yet somehow amusing compound *hjúkrunarmaður* (m.) was thought to be too much for any man to bear (probably because men would then have been subjected to the profession's low social status). On the contrary, as in

In general it can be stated that the more common a symmetrical morphological sex specification is (*afgreiðslukona* (♀) vs. *afgreiðslumaður* (♂)), the less generic the effect of the masculine homophone superordinate term: One tends to use the term *afgreiðslufólk* (n.Sg.) 'male/female cashier', but with a pluralistic meaning (see Fig. 6). Obviously the male reading of such word pairs is so dominant that a generic reading is hindered or prevented.¹⁰ But as the protests surrounding (pseudo-)generic *þingmaður* demonstrate, this term – although without a standard female equivalent in **þingkona* – is more often understood as male Member of Parliament.¹¹

FIGURE 6: Referential symmetry of *-fólk*

<i>afgreiðslufólk</i> (n.) ? <i>afgreiðslumaður</i> (m.)? 'cashier' (♂/♀)	
<i>afgreiðslukona</i> (f./♀) 'female cashier'	<i>afgreiðslumaður</i> (m./♂) 'male cashier'

3.2.2 Compounds using prefixed *kven-/karl-*

Kven-/Karl- prefixes also represent blockades, although this additive method cannot be misunderstood. In contrast to *-maður* 'person' and 'man' as well as *-kona* 'woman' and 'wife', it is not polysemous, meaning that *kven-* always denotes 'female', and *karl-* always 'male'.¹² It indeed appears as though the *kven-/karl-* principle is more durable and productive than compounds with *-konal-/maður*. This method should have the best chance of increased productivity.

German, a completely new compound was coined, namely *hjúkrunarfræðingur* (m.) 'care expert'. In the meantime, women are now also referred to using this more prestigious term; the old term *hjúkrunarkona* is now rarely used.

¹⁰The effect, namely the deneutralisation of the 'generic masculine', is also the intention of increased usage of pair forms such as *Studenten* and *Studentinnen* in German. The masculine forms are subject to a dehomophonisation and disambiguation and become sex-specific masculine forms.

¹¹For more details see Nübling (forthcoming).

¹²There are, however, several other interpretations: *kvenlæknir* does not mean 'female doctor' but rather 'gynaecologist'; *kvenhatari* does not mean 'female hater' or 'hater who is female' but rather 'misogynist'.

Terms for animals in particular often receive these prefixes indicating natural gender (*kvenfugl/karlfugl* for *fugl* 'bird', *kvendýr/karldýr* 'male, female animal'), and also *kvenmaður/karlmaður* 'male/female person' mentioned above, but in no way. **kvenflugmaður* 'female pilot' or **karlflugmaður* 'male pilot'. Everyday usage is often asymmetrical, such as *kvenstúdent* 'female student' or *kvenrithöfundur* 'female author', as men are generally more likely to be understood under the representative – and officially generic – term *stúdent* and *rithöfundur* (**karlstúdent*, **karlriðhöfundur*) (compare Engl. *female doctor* (♀) vs. *doctor* in Hellinger 1990.) As the following list shows, numerous asymmetries such as those shown here are present in the language system:

FIGURE 7: Formal asymmetries of the *kven-/karl-*prefixation

♀	♂
<i>kvenstúdent</i> (♀) 'female student'	but not <i>*karlstúdent</i> (♂) 'student' (♂), rather <i>stúdent</i>
<i>kvenrithöfundur</i> (♀) 'female author'	but not <i>*karlriðhöfundur</i> (♂) 'author' (♂), rather <i>rithöfundur</i>
<i>kvenhetja</i> (♀) 'female hero'	but not <i>*karlhetja</i> (♂) 'hero' (♂), rather <i>hetja</i>
<i>kvenprestur</i> (♀) 'female pastor'	but not <i>*karlprestur</i> (♂), rather <i>prestur</i>
<i>kvenskáti</i> (♀) 'female pathfinder'	but not <i>*karlskáti</i> (♂), rather <i>skáti</i>
<i>kvenfangi</i> (♀) 'female prisoner'	but not <i>*karlfangi</i> (♂), rather <i>fangi</i>

3.2.3. Derivation using the suffix *-ynja*

Finally I would like to discuss a very small group of justified forms which end with *-ynja* (f.♀), which are semantically heterogeneous and only productive on a small scale. The suffix is not productive, is always based on the male form, and is therefore marked: *greifynja* 'countess', *hertogaynja* 'duchess', *ljónynja* 'lioness', *úlfynjalvargynja* 'female wolf', *apynja* 'female ape'. Each of the base forms denotes the male and generally used form.

FIGURE 8: Referential asymmetry of *ljón* 'lion'

<i>ljón</i> (n./♂/♀) lion 'lion' (generic)	
<i>ljón-ynja</i> (f./♀) 'lioness'	<i>ljón</i> (n./♂) 'lion'

3.3. Syntactic specification of natural gender

3.3.1 Attribution using *kvenkyns* – *karlkyns*

There are several asymmetries in natural gender, meaning grammatically feminine forms which can refer to men and which – in accordance with strict gender agreement – must be referred to using *hún*, even if the person in question is male. Nouns such as these are generally weak feminine nouns, a declination class which ends in *-a* in the nom. sg. such as *manneskja* (f.) 'person', which is synonymous with *maður* (m.). An Icelander has reported to me, however, that the feminine *manneskja* (→ *hún*) evokes a more feminine image and that the masculine *maður* (→ *hann*) evokes a more male image. One feminine noun is *lögga* (f.) 'male/female cop', which must receive the pronoun *hún* according to strict gender agreement rules.

<i>löggan</i> (f.) 'the cop' ...	→ <i>hún</i> (f.) <i>er ófrísk</i> (f.) 'pregnant'
- " -	→ <i>hún</i> (f.) <i>er skeggjuð</i> (f.) 'has a beard'
as well as:	
<i>hjúkkan</i> (f.) 'the nurse' ...	→ <i>hún</i> (f.) <i>er ófrísk</i> (f.) 'pregnant'
- " -	→ <i>hún</i> (f.) <i>er skeggjuð</i> (f.) 'has a beard'

Despite this, the term *lögga* (f.) is more strongly associated with men due to the third category social gender: police officers are more often men than women. The opposite case is true of nurses.

When one wishes to clearly express the natural gender of such grammatically feminine terms, the only option is the prefixation of attributes, namely *kvenkyns* 'female' and *karlkyns* 'male' (sometimes also through the prefixation of *kven-/karl-*). The need for specification depends nearly entirely on social gender, meaning that for *hjúkka* (f.) 'nurse' more often the male is specially mentioned (*karlkyns hjúkka*), while *lögga* (f.) 'police officer', although already feminine, the female is specified *kvenkyns lögga*

(or *kvenlögga*, but **karllögga*) (see Figure 9). The behaviour of *hetja* (f.) 'male/female hero' is very revealing, as dictionaries also include the term *kvenhetja*; it is additionally justified although a feminine association should already be provided by the feminine grammatical gender, prefixed **karlhetja* 'male hero' seems to be unnecessary. Due to social gender, *lögga* and *hetja* are so strongly associated with males that the female interpretation is marked.¹³

FIGURE 9: Effect of social gender on attributive natural gender specification

<i>lögga</i> (f./♀/♂) 'male/female cop'		<i>hjúkka</i> (f./♀/♂) 'male/female nurse'	
<i>kvenkyns lögga</i> (♀) 'female cop'	<i>lögga</i> (♂) 'male cop'	<i>hjúkka</i> (♀) 'female nurse'	<i>karlkyns hjúkka</i> (♂) 'male nurse'

The opposite case is much more common, in which weak masculine forms ending in *-i* and which receive the pronoun *hann* are also applicable to females: *nemandi* (m.) 'male/female pupil', *lesandi* (m.) 'male/female reader', *byrjandi* (m.) 'male/female beginner', *skipverji* (m.) 'male/female sailor', *forseti* (m.) 'male/female president'.

3.3.2 Female specification of natural gender with the relative clause: X, sem er kona, ... (or a complete sentence)

This method is materially the most elaborate as well as the most asymmetrical, as it is almost only used in expressing female natural gender and often for supposedly generic nouns denoting human beings ending in *-maður*. Examples have already been mentioned (such as the title of this article). Syntactic methods of expression are used for peripheral, less common concepts and are most often used when no other lexical or morphological means are available. Although Icelandic has three morphological ways of expressing natural gender, these are not used systematically and with productive rules. Idiosyncrasies in the form of blockades and lexicalisations are also characteristic of modern Icelandic.

¹³Vice versa this phenomenon is very rare, but there is one term, namely *karldansari* 'male dancer' (m./♂).

4. Potential results of feminist language critique: The expansion of morphological natural gender specification in German

Finally, it should be mentioned that German has been a target for feminist language critique and language change for over 20 years now. German originally had idiosyncrasies similar to Icelandic, and also shares important structural characteristics such as the three-gender system and a strong morphological presence of grammatical gender. The most important methods in German referring to women are the justified suffix *-in* and the compound element *-frau*. Both were originally extremely limited in scope and hardly productive. One example: In the sixties a woman was also called a *Kaufmann* 'business man'. The suggestion to call her a *Kauffrau* 'businesswoman' (in the pattern of *Ehemann/Ehefrau*) seemed so absurd at the time, that (male) linguists criticised that people associate this term more with a 'buyable' woman, a prostitute, than with a businesswoman. The first step was the successful mutation of the female *Kaufmann* to the justified *Kaufmännin*, which represents a semantic paradox. Only as late as the 80s did *Kauffrau* make its breakthrough, and did so together with numerous other compounds with *-frau* (*Reisekauffrau*, *Bürokauffrau*, *Parteifrau*, *Kamerafrau* etc.). Even though this progress was made slowly, against strong opposition, and was made fun of in the early going, both *-in* and *-frau* have managed to break free from their selective restrictions and have increased their productivity. This demonstrates the effectiveness and success of language change induced by feminist language critique, which led to a more just, symmetrical, and less sexist system of personal denominations.

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