'To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life?' A Discourse Analysis of English and German Reader Responses to Sex-/Gender-Neutral Language in *The Cook and the Carpenter*

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Abstract: Linguistic research and linguistic activism have resulted in key changes to official language use. However, revisions remain contested and many English and German speakers continue to employ male generic terms. In this article I explore whether the encounter with sex-/gender-neutral terminology in June Arnold's novel *The Cook and the Carpenter* can prompt readers to review their language use and consider alternatives. Based on narrative research, my premise is that fiction can create familiarity with new terms, which is the first step toward wider linguistic change. I frame my investigation with Wittgenstein's notion that 'to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life', and put it to the test with a discourse analysis of English and German reader responses. The results of my study show that Arnold's novel stimulates fruitful debate around the issue of linguistic representation. Based on my findings, I propose to integrate literary texts which engage with the issue of sex/gender and language into educational settings to further promote neutral/inclusive language use.

Acknowledgements

1. Introduction

Over the past fifty years, linguistic activism and linguistic research have resulted in key revisions to official language use. Official guidelines now frequently advise against the generic use of male nouns and pronouns, and advocate neutral/inclusive[1] language use. To provide two examples: since 2007, UK

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[1] I employ the compound 'sex-/gender-neutral language' to avoid the conflation of biological sex and social gender. My aim is to highlight that both concepts are at once distinct and interrelated. However, to avoid oversaturation I employ the term sparingly and use shortened versions such as 'neutral language'. I explore the theoretical basis for this further in my forthcoming book *Rewriting Language: How Literary Texts Can Promote Inclusive Language Use*. 'Inclusive' refers to the use of 'women and men' while 'neutral' refers to practices such as epicene pronouns. Due to the different grammatical structures of English and German a neutral revision is more easily achieved for the English language.

Government Bills are to be drafted neutrally, and since 2019, the Landeshauptstadt Hannover recommends 'a gender-fair administrative language'[2] ('eine geschlechtergerechte Verwaltungssprache') (2019: n.p.). Official language today often aims to address all sexes/genders.

Linguistic change has also filtered down into other areas of public life. Moser and Hannover, for example, found that 'the proportions of female and male persons [in todays' schoolbooks] were comparably more equal' than previously (2014: 399). And Cieszkowski (Bydgoszcz) showed that job adverts are worded predominantly in a 'gender-fair' way today (2015: 30). However, Moser and Hannover also found 'in today's books […] males to still be more frequent than females, particularly among adults and in books for mathematics' (2014: 399), while, according to Cieszkowski (Bydgoszcz), 'gender-specific' ('geschlechtsspezifische') and 'discriminatory' ('diskriminierende') job adverts continue to persist (2015: 30). In a similar vein, the various neutral pronouns suggested for the English language, as charted by Baron (n.d.), are yet to be widely accepted. The implementation of neutral/inclusive language therefore remains an ongoing project.

This seems particularly the case for general language use, as empirical studies illustrate. For example, when presenting participants with short texts and asking them to 'complete […] a fill-in-the-gaps task to assess spontaneous gender-fair language use' (2014: 218), Kuhn and Gabriel found that 'people spontaneously used gender-fair language infrequently' (2014: 220). When instructed to use inclusive terms, 'gender-fair language use […] was significantly higher than spontaneous gender-fair language use' (2014: 221); however, overall 'the participants in both samples used gender-fair forms in less than 70% of the cases' (2014: 221). So despite official guidelines, speakers do not necessarily employ neutral/inclusive language.

Sczesny, Moser and Wood's study showed similar results. Asking respondents to fill in blanks in short texts, the authors found that '[o]n average, participants used gender-inclusive language forms in about 4 of the 10 texts' (2015: 947). Habit played a key role in shaping linguistic choices, as a follow-up assessment after two weeks highlighted. '[P]articipants were more likely to use gender-inclusive language', Sczesny et al. found, 'when they had used it frequently in the past and thus had formed language-use habits' (2015: 948). Exposure to neutral/inclusive alternatives to male generic terms can have a profound impact.

This is supported by Koeser, Kuhn and Sczesny's study. The authors assessed how reading texts containing 'gender-fair forms versus other forms' influences language use (2015: 345). When asked to complete 'ten fill-in-the-blank tasks […] [p]articipants used gender-fair forms rarely' (2015: 346). However, 'presenting gender-fair forms in a text revealed an effective strategy to increase readers' own use of gender-fair language' (2015: 346). In effect, exposure and familiarity appear to support neutral/inclusive language use. The history of the Swedish neutral pronoun 'hen' is a case in point. As Sendén, Bäck and

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[2] All translations (except of Wittgenstein) are my own.

Lindqvist's study showed, despite 'high resistance […,] attitudes and behavior became more positive over time' (2015: 8). An aversion to change was overcome through familiarity.

In her book *Women Changing Language*, Pauwels identifies factors which support linguistic change. These are: '[a]n awareness of what constitutes linguistic discrimination', 'a personal commitment towards linguistic equality', 'role models […] who use non-sexist language', 'a supportive environment in which the use of non-sexist language is tolerated' and 'an environment in which non-sexist language is the norm or preferred usage' (1998: 214-215). My premise is that fiction can play a key role in both raising awareness and creating familiarity, and thereby promoting neutral/inclusive language use.

First of all, as Zwaan's study illustrated, literary readers employ additional cognitive resources (1994: 929). This increased engagement, according to Mar and Oatley, is due to the mental simulation of the story's characters and events (2008: 177). Green and Brock term this process 'transportation' (2000: 701) – and the higher the level of transportation, the authors found, the more readers agreed with the presented views and perspectives (2000: 706). Consequently, resistance to new linguistic practices could shift through the engagement with a literary text.

This potential is of central interest to this article. In the following I investigate whether Wittgenstein's notion that 'to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life' holds true for English and German readers of June Arnold's 1973 novel *The Cook and the Carpenter*. A work of speculative fiction, the text is narrated from within the context of an egalitarian community and explores the possibilities and challenges of establishing a neutral linguistic and social alternative to the dominant norm. The members of the community employ an epicene pronoun, 'na', to refer to each other. This pronoun aims to render sex/gender irrelevant – a practice, I propose, which has awareness-raising potential. To investigate the validity of my proposal, I ask: 'Does the encounter with neutral terminology prompt readers to reconsider linguistic norms?'

2. Imagining a language

In his 1953 *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, Wittgenstein explores the significance of linguistic change and states that 'to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life' (1998: 8). However, what does 'form of life' actually mean? According to McGinn: 'the term "form of life" is intended to evoke the idea that speaking a language is a way of conducting oneself with words in a life with others' (2013: 55). 'Lebensform' then refers to the shared context within which speakers communicate: it is 'a life with others'. This communication takes place within certain boundaries. As the formulation 'conducting oneself with words' implies, linguistic practices are linked to certain norms and expectations. That is, in order to partake in a 'form of life', speakers follow an agreed code of conduct.

But neither language nor behaviour is fixed. As McGinn elaborates, '[t]he idea of a form of life applies [...] to historical groups of individuals who are bound together into a community by a shared set of complex, language-involving practices' (2013: 55). The use of the adjective 'historical' is telling. It highlights that while linguistic practices are subject to communal convention, these norms can, and do, shift over the course of time. One example is the use of the English pronoun 'you', which once served a similar function to the formal German 'Sie', but is today employed informally. In effect, over the course of history, the process of 'conducting oneself with words' has changed – and so has the associated 'form of life'.

However, this process is dependent on acceptance by the speech community. As Baker explains, 'they [forms of life] are in a certain sense conventional [... and] rest on *agreement*' (1984: 278, emphasis in original). She elaborates: 'anyone claiming to participate in a practice can be checked by others in the community' (1984: 279). Therefore, 'imagining a language' is as reliant on 'a life with others' as the existing norms and expectations. Moreover, for linguistic change to take place new practices need to be transmitted to the next generation. Effectively, as Labov explains, '[c]*hildren must learn to talk differently from their mothers'* (2001: 415, emphasis in original). To provide a useful illustration, there have been numerous proposals for an English epicene third-person singular pronoun. However, none of them have yet been successfully implemented into the English language – in effect, children continue to talk *like* their mothers – leading Baron to term the epicene third-person singular pronoun '[t]he word that failed' (1981: 83).

The Cook and the Carpenter explores the link between language and 'Lebensform' by portraying the neutral linguistic and social practices of an egalitarian community. In doing so, the novel raises awareness of the dominant norms and familiarises readers with an alternative linguistic and social conception of the sexes/genders. The members of the community are referred to by an epicene pronoun and neutral names, and these neutral linguistic practices are here both based on and lead to a new 'form of life'. That is, within the community sex/gender is a non-decisive feature. However, this understanding is restricted. Beyond the community, linguistic neutrality is 'checked by others': members of the wider sociocultural context contest the group's practices. This manifests itself in resistance and even violence.

In the following I evaluate whether the text can help to prompt readers to consider a neutral alternative to sexed/gendered language. I briefly present linguistic innovation in Arnold's novel, before I discuss the results of my focus group study. Analysing the responses by English and German speakers to neutral terminology in *The Cook and the Carpenter*, I gauge whether the novel prompts them to reconsider linguistic norms.

3. Neutral language in *The Cook and the Carpenter*

Drawn together by the desire to establish an alternative to the restrictive status quo, the egalitarian community at the centre of Arnold's novel conducts a linguistic and social experiment. Creating a context in which sex/gender no longer matter, the new language encompasses neutral names, such as 'carpenter', 'cook' and 'Chris', as well as a new epicene third-person singular pronoun and possessive, 'na' and 'nan'. The example below provides an insight into the group's linguistic practices:

> The carpenter walked around to the east side of the porch and started the sander up again. [...] The sander screeched across the worn boards, pulling up the patches of thick deck paint in gluey streaks, melting it, mixing the smell of burning lead and color into the air already thick with grit and dampness. The carpenter's breathing was protectively shallow. Na wore a strip of diaper around nan forehead to catch the sweat and prevent it from streaking nan glasses. (Arnold 1973: 4)

The term 'carpenter' seems neutral at first instance – '[a] person who makes and repairs wooden objects and structures' (Oxford Dictionaries 2016: n.p.) could be female or male. This interpretation seems supported by the pronoun 'na' which evokes no specific sex/gender. However, the readers' 'shared life' is informed by the categorisation of human beings into either women or men. The lack of obvious linguistic cues such as the familiar pronouns 'he' or 'she' hinders this process – an experience which Hokenson describes in her review of Arnold's novel as 'profoundly unsettl[ing]' (1988: 67). She elaborates that '[w]ith ciphers instead of common subject pronouns, we are unable to imagine the body. Unable to imagine the body, we are unable to relate to the "self"' (1988: 67). Confronting this hurdle to imagination, *The Cook and the Carpenter* challenges readers to 'imagine the body' nevertheless.

As Arnold remarks in the preface, '[s]ince the differences between men and women are so obvious to all [...] I have therefore used one pronoun for both, trusting the reader to know which is which' (1973: n.p.). Human beings were, and still are, predominantly assigned to certain biological and social categories on the basis of sex/gender – '[l]ive human beings are generally perceived as women or as men, not as androgynies' (1979: 77), McConnell-Ginet argues. By employing a neutral pronoun, 'na', *The Cook and the Carpenter* blurs any instant categorisation[3] and thereby puts the spotlight on a key criterion in readers' 'shared life': sex/gender.

Hindered by neutral language, readers might draw on convention, behaviour and context to aid identification. This process might go as follows for the 'carpenter': First of all, the term is not as neutral as it might initially seem. Although the definition names '[a] person', 'carpenter' carries certain

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[3] The importance of neutral/inclusive language use has been highlighted and promoted in recent years by non-binary, trans and queer communities. New sex-/gender-neutral pronouns, such as 'ze' and 've' for example, have been created by activists to enable non-binary people to self-identify.

sexed/gendered connotations. Secondly, the carpenter's use of a 'sander [which] screeched across the worn boards' and 'a strip of diaper around nan forehead to catch the sweat' evoke specific behaviours. Thirdly, the social standing of the character, as I show below, prompts the carpenter's categorisation.

In the novel, the carpenter's place in the community is portrayed as follows: '[w]hat you say is important to people [...] People have learned to value your mind because it is clearer than most of ours' (1973: 46). Additionally, the 'carpenter' is presented in opposition to the 'cook', who is described as 'too sensitive; na has spent nan life feeling what other people – the other person – feel(s); [...] Na never creates a situation of nan own' (1973: 42). The juxtaposition of 'mind' and 'feeling', characteristic of the male-female binary in the reader's 'shared life', seems to cement the interpretation of the 'carpenter' as 'male'. As '[c]ertain acts, activities, stances, roles, etc. are frequently enacted by members of a particular sex', Ochs states, 'they are unmarked behaviors' (1992: 343). That is, they come to be associated with one sex/gender rather than the other and therefore evoke 'man' or 'woman' despite linguistic neutrality.

However, at the end of narrative these assumptions are shown to be unfounded. The carpenter is in fact 'female' not 'male' – exposing both the binary norms and the social/cognitive bias in the readers' community. As Hokenson states, through the encounter with the text '[readers come] face to face with every shred of our own sexism' (1988: 67). The realisation of the impact of linguistic norms, I propose, can have a profound impact. By gaining an understanding of language's role in assigning and reinforcing fixed and binary notions of sex/gender, readers might re-evaluate their own linguistic practices.

In the next section, I explore how English and German focus group participants engage with the issue of the linguistic representation of women and men. I investigate the awareness-raising potential of *The Cook and the Carpenter* in relation to the importance of neutral/inclusive language use.

4. Responses by English and German readers

4.1 Methodology

As language is a social tool, I selected focus groups as the most suitable method for data collection[4]. Wilkinson argues that 'the interactions that take place within focus groups are closer to everyday social processes than those afforded by most other research methods' (1999: 227). And by centering on discussion, focus groups allow researchers an insight into how participants' perceptions are formed and regulated by social norms. This is particularly relevant in relation to new and contested practices, such as neutral/inclusive

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[4] The results presented here are taken from a larger study undertaken as part of my PhD research. The costs for focus group materials and refreshments were supported by a Jackson Lewis Scholarship.

language. As Baker explains, a language is based on the speech community's 'agreement' (1984: 278) – focus groups present an opportunity to see this agreement being negotiated. While the discussion will be invariably shaped by the focus group setting, it nevertheless illustrates the possibilities and challenges facing linguistic change.

Discourse analysis supports the social component of focus groups by providing an insight into the normative nature of participants' responses. According to Taylor, it allows the researcher to 'explore […] ideas which are commonly held across society' (2013: 57). That is, discourse analysis enables 'accessing the collective, though not necessarily coherent, "worldview" of a society' (2013: 2). Respondents' perceptions of sex-/gender-neutral language therefore provide an understanding of the wider sociocultural context. As Potter and Wetherell state: 'people are using their language to *construct* versions of the social world', and this construction aims to achieve a particular effect (1987: 33, emphasis in original). While speakers might not necessarily be conscious of the 'constructed and constructive' nature of their language use (1987: 35), the produced discourse provides an intriguing account of linguistic norms and expectations.

To assess contextual differences, I conducted four focus groups which varied both linguistically and in composition. Two groups consisted of native English speakers, who were familiar with one another, and two groups were formed of native Germans, who met for the first time. A comparison between these settings is fruitful as the similarities and differences of readers' perceptions illustrate particular hurdles for each language.

A pilot focus group, consisting of three non-native English speakers, Claudia, Janine and Martina[5] (three female participants, average age: 32 years) allowed me to test my materials. Moreover, it also brought valuable insights – in fact, the themes explored in the pilot group mirrored the native English and German discussions. I therefore integrated the pilot group data into my analysis.

The first native English group consisted of three female and one male participants, Sam, Jennie, Rich and Sarah (average age: 26 years), and the second native English group was made up of four female participants, Jo, Alice, Mandy and Jessica (average age: 31 years). All native English participants completed Parks and Roberton's 2000 'Inventory of Attitudes Toward Sexist/Nonsexist Language – General (IASNL-G)[6] and held supportive attitudes. While the native English groups were assigned according to familiarity, the native German participants were grouped on the basis of their responses to the inventory. Matthias, Antje, Ines, Jochen and Katrin (three female and two male participants; average age: 26 years) held supportive attitudes and formed the first native German group. The second native German group consisted of Sebastian, Doreen and Berit (two female and one male participants; average age: 21 years) who held neutral attitudes.

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[5] All names have been changed.
[6] The inventory has been tested by Parks and Roberton and also employed by other researchers. Sarrasin et al., for example, used part of the IASNL-G in their study 'Sexism and Attitudes Toward Gender-Neutral Language: The Case of English, French, and German'.

The difference in attitudes toward sexist/nonsexist language provided diverse perspectives on the perceptions of linguistic representation – as did the decision to work with mixed sex/gender groups. While issues can arise from bringing men and women together in a focus group setting (Krueger 1994: 78), Goss and Leinbach argue that heterogeneous groupings can also help 'to reveal to participants the gender-differentiated nature of social knowledge and the distinctive experiences and perspectives of men and women' (1996: 119). While such groups need to be carefully moderated, both the facilitator and respondents can gain new understandings through shared interaction.

All groups were presented with the opening pages of *The Cook and the Carpenter*[7] in either English or German, and asked to reflect on the linguistic practices in the text. Each meeting took place as follows: after welcoming participants and explaining the structure of the focus group, respondents were given about 10 minutes to read the excerpt. I asked them to pay particular attention to the nouns and pronouns used in the novel, and write down anything they noticed. Once they had completed the reading/writing task, I employed explorative questions to elicit responses, such as 'What did you notice regarding the nouns and pronouns?', 'What effect did they have?' and 'Who did you imagine when reading?'. After our discussion, I summarised the key points and asked if there was anything they would like to add. I then thanked participants for taking part and provided my contact details for additional questions or comments.

In the following, I evaluate to what extent participants' discourse reflects Wittgenstein's premise 'to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life'.

4.2 Results

The frame for my analysis was provided by Parks and Roberton's 1998 article 'Contemporary Arguments Against Nonsexist Language: Blaubergs (1980) Revisited'. Based on Blaubergs' study, which identified eight frequent arguments against linguistic change, Parks and Roberton revisited oppositional perspectives to nonsexist language eighteen years later. In line with their findings they revised and extended Blauberg's categories; three of Parks and Roberton's twelve categories proved particularly useful for my analysis. 'Tradition', 'Change is Too Difficult' and 'Language is a Trivial Concern' (1998: 452-453) strongly featured in the discourse on whether or not neutral language was a viable alternative. In effect, as becomes visible below, participants not only reflected on the use of sex-/gender-neutral language in the novel but struggled with it. In the following I present how participants' discourse confirms or challenges Parks and Roberton's categories, and analyse how the text raises awareness around linguistic representation.

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[7] Due to time constraints we focused on the opening pages of the novel.

Tradition

Appeals to tradition formed a central component in the discourse of focus group participants. When asked for their responses to the terms employed in *The Cook and the Carpenter*, linguistic norms were often cited as a reason for why respondents struggled with the text. The following exchange between two pilot focus group participants illustrates this aptly:

Martina: I don't know, the second text really frustrated me, it brought out

Janine: I agree

Martina: I don't know, I just got so confused and so frustrated. As much as I want to believe in the fact that we can actually use a gender-neutral pronoun to refer to people and etc. etc. I got so confused at some point that I stopped reading it and I had to read another text.[8] As much as I want to believe that it can actually work sometimes it doesn't […]

Janine: But yeah, I agree with you with the frustrating thing, I don't think it's because we don't know if we're talking about men or women here, it's just because you get lost in all the characters. I couldn't follow the story, like, who is 'Will'? And who is the 'cook'? And who is the 'carpenter'? And the stranger, is the stranger the woman?

Martina: Yeah

Janine: Or is the woman the stranger? So at some point I just came back to the text, I was just like, OK so this one might be this one. What about this one? Is it the cook and just, so yeah I agree with the frustrating thing. But yeah, the pronoun it feels weird not because, I think it's just because we're so used to hav[ing] 'him' or 'her'

Participants were keen to highlight their support of neutral language: Martina stated that she 'want[s] to believe in the fact that we can actually use a gender-neutral pronoun to refer to people' and Janine pointed out that 'I don't think it's because we don't know if we're talking about men or women'. However, both respondents linked their experience of frustration to the use of 'na'. Martina argued that '[a]s much as I want to believe that it [the neutral pronoun] can actually work sometimes it doesn't', which indicates that this particular change is too far removed from the norm to be viable. Janine stated this even more clearly: 'I think it's just because we're so used to hav[ing] "him" or "her"'. The use of a neutral pronoun is at odds with tradition – the use of 'he' or 'she' to refer to people – and therefore frustrates understanding.

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[8] The participant is referring to one of the two other texts discussed as part of the larger focus group study.

This sense of 'frustration' and 'confusion' is mentioned across all focus groups. Rich, from the first native English group, remarked that: 'I found it quite difficult to place everything, as in I couldn't tell who was who, whether the "cook" was a man or the "carpenter" was a man or woman cause normally you'd rely so much on the pronouns to sort of build around. And you wouldn't even notice it normally but without the pronouns I found it quite, you know, very difficult to read'. The absence of 'she' or 'he' inhibited immediate identification of the character. As Rich stated: 'I couldn't tell who was who'. Moreover, the participant was unable to specify the characters' sex/gender: 'whether the "cook" was a man or the "carpenter" was a man or woman'. Linguistic norms enable instant categorisation, and do so without speakers being consciously aware: 'you wouldn't even notice it', Rich said. However, without these cues the narrative became, according to the respondent, 'very difficult to read'.

This reflection on the role of pronouns is telling. Rich might not have 'noticed' the binary categorisation of human beings if linguistic norms had been observed; however, the disruption of tradition prompted a deeper engagement with the role of language. As he stated, 'normally you'd rely so much on the pronouns to sort of build around'. Through the engagement with the novel Rich realised how much the linguistic status quo predetermines understanding. Linguistic norms are not only evoked by participants to justify the struggle of 'making sense' but are themselves considered in a new light. Due to the encounter with a 'new' language, respondents begin to question current linguistic practices.

This questioning of tradition was particularly pronounced in the second native English focus group. Reflecting on Arnold's novel, participants discussed the power of linguistic norms. Mandy said:

> The sort of lack of 'his', 'her', 'she', 'he' became sort of 'nan' which sort of was interesting. But at the same time because they were still using 'woman' and 'man' and then 'mister' later and 'Will', and nouns were sort of like 'male' and 'female' and 'girl' and 'boy'. You sort of, I sort of got confused cause I was like, it sort of half did it and then half didn't. So I was sort of wondering what the effect of that was because all it did, it meant I went through and implanted my own 'he', 'his', 'she', 'hers'. And then I was like, as much as they might want me to read it 'na', my head was automatically planting in so it's, like, just how engrained that is I suppose

Initially Mandy argued that it is the mix of epicene and traditional terms[9] which led her to reject a neutral interpretation: 'they were still using "woman" and "man" […] all it did, it meant I went through and implanted my own "he", "his", "she", "hers"'. However, as she continued, 'my head was automatically planting in so it's, like, just how engrained that is I suppose'. In effect, the process of 'implanting' led her to realise that the 'engrained' default is to categorise into 'female' or 'male'. Jessica entered the conversation:

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[9] In the novel, neutral terms are employed in reference to the members of the community, whereas those outside of the group continue to be linguistically sexed/gendered.

Jessica: I found it a little bit difficult to follow

Mandy: Yeah

Jessica: Because we use 'his', 'her' so much as a shorthand for who the character is, to establish it. And, you know, it's funny cause you mentioned *Wolf Hall* before. A lot of people found it hard to follow *Wolf Hall* because she was always using 'he' rather than the character's name. Coincidentally a lot of male characters in there so not really a problem with the female characters. But, you know, not basically just establishing, helping people to follow a narrative. So it was so different and a little bit disorientating. Yeah, also that was Chapter 1 as well and you just dive straight into it

Jessica built on Mandy's comment: 'we use "his", "her" so much as a shorthand for who the character is, to establish it'. As Jessica stated, speakers rely on the familiar pronouns to 'read' a character, to understand it. She here drew a parallel with Mantel's *Wolf Hall* which, while not employing a neutral pronoun, also thwarts immediate identification of 'who is who'. This is an interesting detour, as Jessica effectively proposes that it is the use of one pronoun – be it 'na' or 'he' – which frustrates readers. However, while 'he' hindered the identification of 'male characters', 'na' thwarted the binary classification required in the reader's 'shared life'. The conversation continued as follows:

Mandy: Yeah

Jessica: Well what's happening? But yeah

Mandy: Cause I've kept thinking that the very first one I thought was like a speech tick and it was like

Jessica: So did I, it was

Mandy: Yeah, 'now in nan pursuit of truth' is it some American thing? I was like, no yeah and interesting that it's like 'the carpenter and cook', 'the cook and the carpenter' […] sort of main characters in a way. And obviously about it's, you automatically go 'the cook' is a woman, 'the carpenter' is a man and it's sort [of] how much those two professions obviously come with their own sort [of] preconceived gender

As Mandy highlighted, 'you automatically got "the cook" is a woman, "the carpenter" is a man and it's sort [of] how much those two professions obviously come with their own sort [of] preconceived gender'. That is, even linguistically neutral terms are associated with one sex/gender – imagining a neutral 'form of life' seems therefore clearly impaired by dominant norms.

These reflections on *The Cook and the Carpenter* illustrate participants' thoughtful and critical engagement with tradition. The comment below by

Sebastian from the second native German group highlights just how the participant's imagination is guided by norms and how encountering neutral language in the novel prompts reflection:

> What made me perceive them as men is perhaps more of a default position – it's perhaps strange, one needs to think about this more deeply. But it's the first thing that came to my mind. That one tends to assume it's a man until the text says otherwise. That it states at some point 'Ms so-and-so' or 'she', that one actually waits, one waits for a few sentences and if it doesn't happen, then one automatically assumes that it's a man.[10]

While Sebastian assumed 'male-as-norm' in his interpretation, reflecting on this assumption in the focus group setting led him to become aware of this previously unnoticed 'default position'. In effect, engaging with *The Cook and the Carpenter* encouraged him to contemplate the linguistic (and conceptual) status quo: "one tends to assume it's a man until the text says otherwise". As much as the novel caused frustration in readers, it also led them to reflect more deeply on underlying norms. Nevertheless, as the responses in relation to the category 'Change is Too Difficult' illustrate, these insights did not necessarily motivate speakers to consider neutral language a possibility.

Change is Too Difficult

Arnold's novel frequently prompted participants to reflect on the pitfalls of neutral language. As with comments on 'Tradition', respondents mentioned the difficulty of engaging with the text and, as a result, the non-viability of epicene terms. As Jochen from the first native German group remarked:

> I find mainly that when one returns to the previous sentence, that was actually the frustrating thing. To look again, OK who was that exactly and then, I replaced it accordingly. Or I find, or I'm not quite sure, I think in some instances it was ambiguous, that one didn't really know, does this refer to a male person or to a female person and then it was particularly difficult. But I think from the context it perhaps became clear. I thought it was more difficult to read definitely.[11]

Jochen found the inability to instantly classify characters frustrating. The neutral pronoun compelled him 'to look again, OK who was that exactly' and to replace

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[10] German original: 'Was bei mir dazu geführt hat, dass ich es als Männer wahrgenommen hab, ist vielleicht eher so die grundlegende Voreinstellung – ist vielleicht komisch, da müsste man auch länger drüber nachdenken, das ist nur das Erste was mir in den Sinn gekommen ist. Dass es, dass man solange dazu neigt von einem Mann auszugehen, bis im Text das Gegenteil kommt. Also gesagt wird irgendwann mal "Frau soundso" oder "sie", dass man eigentlich wartet, so man wartet nen paar Sätze und wenn das nicht kommt, dann legt man sich automatisch darauf fest, dass es nen Mann ist.'

[11] German original: 'Ich find meistens wenn man nen Satz zurückgegangen ist, das war eigentlich eher das Frustrierende. Dann nochmal zu schauen, OK wer war das jetzt genau und dann eben, das je nachdem hab ichs ersetzt. Oder ich find, oder ich bin mir nicht ganz sicher, ich glaub an manchen Punkten war es aber einfach auch zweideutig, dass man nicht ganz genau wusste, bezieht sichs jetzt auf eine männliche Person oder auf eine weibliche Person und da war es dann besonders schwierig. Aber ich denke aus dem Zusammenhang vielleicht hat es sich dann ergeben, ich glaube das war schwieriger zu lesen auf jeden Fall.'

'na' according to context. However, while perceived necessary, this replacement was not straightforward in all cases. He stated that 'in some instances it was ambiguous' and a neutral interpretation was considered 'particularly difficult'. Consequently, the respondent felt that the text was more difficult to read.

While Jochen's response is relatively measured, Ines from the same group expressed her 'frustration' with neutral terminology more strongly. In fact, it led her to question whether the text was able to function as fiction to begin with:

> As one has to think in this particular way, it is a bit of analytic work and when it's prose that intends to entertain, I wouldn't read it in my free time. It's a feeling of scientific work, where I have to look, OK what refers to what, who is who, what does it intend to say. And as a result, one becomes, I wouldn't become immersed in the plot, that it's so gripping, that I want to continue reading. But rather OK, I read two more pages and then I'm gone.[12]

Ines described reading the text as 'analytical work' and had 'a feeling of scientific work' – both of which are directly at odds with her expectations of 'prose that intends to entertain'. She considered the need to identify 'what refers to what, who is who' a central hurdle to her engagement with the novel. This leads her to ultimately reject the text: 'I read two more pages and then I'm gone'. While Ines's response might be more direct, it corresponds with Jochen's argument. His use of the terms 'the frustrating thing' and 'particularly difficult' equally signal that engagement was essentially impaired by the use of sex-/gender-neutral language. In effect, linguistic change appears too difficult to respondents.

The following exchange between two pilot group participants illustrates the underlying issues of employing neutral terminology:

> Martina: I had to go back a thousand times and try and understand it was that and then the next sentence you have to do the same, it just made it really slow, it kind of interrupted the flow

> Claudia: You can't, you can't, I don't know, you read something and you need to picture what's going on in your head. What is that, like, an empty shell of a person? You can't portray a character without actually telling people who they are. The same with the first one [*The Left Hand of Darkness*[13]], the narrator, it's important in a sense that you need to know who's telling the story. Are they reliable? Are they making it all up? Am I going to believe it? Am I going to root for them? Am I going to like them or not? It's like if you don't tell me then what's the point in listening to your story?

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[12] German original: 'Dadurch, dass man auf diese Art und Weise denken muss, ist es ein bisschen Analysearbeit und wenn das Prosa ist, die zur Unterhaltung dient, das würde ich nicht in meiner Freizeit lesen. Das ist ein Gefühl wissenschaftlichen Arbeitens, wo ich gucken muss, OK was bezieht sich auf was, wer ist wer, was möchte gesagt werden. Und das dadurch fällt man, also ich würde nicht so in die Handlung reinfallen, dass es so spannend wird, dass ich weiterlesen will. Sondern OK, ich les noch zwei Seiten und dann geh ich.'
[13] The respondent is referring to another text discussed as part of the larger focus group study.

> Martina: I don't know, I found it different though, like in the first one [*The Left Hand of Darkness*] it didn't really matter to me, the narrator I don't get, I don't find someone reliable because it's, they're a man or a woman but I can understand the story
>
> Claudia: I'm not saying that, I did not say that
>
> Martina: No no no no of course. But like for you, it seems to me that for you two it was more important to know about the narrator than for me. I didn't really care about the first text but the second text for me I couldn't understand not knowing who was man, who was male who was women. Cause to be, at the end of the day, to be fair that's how we see people. When we see people, we want to identify because that helps us understand things kind of in [a] very stereotype way but still this is the way we make sense of reality, so I do understand what you mean

Martina's response aligned with Ines's experience of the novel. She stated that having to 'go back a thousand times and try and understand it' made reading 'really slow' and 'interrupted the flow'. Effectively, Martina also considered the encounter with the text 'analytical work' and thereby questioned the use of neutral language. However, it is Claudia's contribution which draws out some of the potential undercurrents of Martina's response. As Claudia reflected, engaging with a text relies on being able to simulate the narrative: 'you read something and you need to picture what's going on in your head'. However, the use of neutral terminology hindered this simulation. Consequently, Claudia was unable to 'picture' the characters. As she explained this process: '[w]hat is that, like, an empty shell of a person?'. That is, the absence of 'she' or 'he' resulted in the breakdown of her imagination. Without the familiar pronouns, Claudia was unable to identify the 'person' who therefore remained 'an empty shell'. She explained: '[y]ou can't portray a character without actually telling people who they are'. And 'who they are', in the dominant sociocultural context, is either 'female' or 'male'.

Claudia's argument illustrates how profoundly sex/gender and identity are linked. Not 'knowing which is which' made her ask: 'Are they reliable? Are they making it all up? Am I going to believe it? Am I going to root for them? Am I going to like them or not?' Without the definite categories of 'man' or 'woman', she felt prompted to question the character's reliability. In effect, she felt unable to respond to the 'empty shell'. Martina disagreed with this assessment: 'I don't find someone reliable because […] they're a man or a woman'; however, she concurred that readers exist in a binary context. And this 'shared life' profoundly shapes their experience. She stated that 'at the end of the day, to be fair that's how we see people', i.e. dominant sociocultural norms stipulate linguistic and conceptual segregation. Martina elaborated: '[w]hen we see people, we want to identify because that helps us understand things kind of in [a] very stereotype way but still this is the way we make sense of reality'. As the focus group responses highlight, if readers are unable to 'make sense of reality' in the

familiar way they feel frustrated. And this frustration ultimately leads to the rejection of neutral terminology.

However, as with tradition this experience can also prompt a reconsideration of dominant practices. Participants in all focus groups reflected on the possibility of introducing a neutral pronoun. In line with Sczesny et al.'s 2015 study, respondents argued that increased familiarity would improve understanding. As Berit from the second native German group stated, 'I think if one was used to it, with the "na", then one would probably be able to understand it. In effect, in a language, for example, which has no "he" or "she"'[14]. That is, a new pronoun – once speakers were familiar with it – could indeed evoke a new 'form of life'. Alice from the second native English group agreed: 'I'm replacing "nan" with "his", "her", "na" with "she", "he" and I'm doing that but I think as you read on you would get used to [it]'. As a result, the encounter with the novel – and the whole novel in particular, as Alice indicates – seems to open up the possibility of a new 'Sprache' and 'Lebensform' for some readers.

Nevertheless, such responses were in the minority and concerns around neutral terminology dominated. Reflections on the social implications, in particular, led to considerations of the significance of linguistic change. While responses in the category 'Language is a Trivial Concern' featured not as strongly in the focus groups, participants' comments are insightful when considering Wittgenstein's premise.

Language is a Trivial Concern

Respondents questioned the importance of changing linguistic norms across all focus groups. Ines from the first native German group, for example, mentioned that 'the "na" only hindered the flow of reading and didn't impact on my imagination'[15]. According to her, employing a neutral pronoun did not change the categorisation of characters into 'male' or 'female'. The following conversation between two participants from the first native English group, started by Rich, illustrates this concern further:

> The second one I thought was perhaps the most ambiguous because you could, almost you could read it as an argument, it doesn't necessarily have to be a pro-feminist argument I don't think. Cause then you could read that as an anti-political correctness argument as well, saying well look how confusing it is when you change, when you try to neutralise all the gendered pronouns. And suddenly you can't understand anything, so why do it?

Rich queried the effectiveness of the neutral pronoun on two accounts. Firstly, he reflected that the conceptual hurdle presented by 'na' might actually illustrate the inadequacy of neutral language: 'look how confusing it is when you change,

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[14] German original: 'Ich finde wenn man jetzt daran gewöhnt wäre, mit dem "na", dann könnte man es wahrscheinlich also schon verstehen. Also in ner Sprache, zum Beispiel, wo es kein "er" oder "sie" gibt.'
[15] German original: 'Das "na" hat mich nur am Lesefluss behindert und nicht meine Vorstellung geändert.'

when you try to neutralise all the gendered pronouns. And suddenly you can't understand anything'. The inability to instantly categorise, according to the respondent, might effectively act in support of an 'anti-political correctness argument'. He continued:

> And that it sort of highlights that changing the language without changing the concepts or the sort of prejudices and the stigmas attached to it doesn't necessarily solve anything, if that makes sense, because you could call everyone 'na' and women could still be oppressed if that makes sense. And so doing that alone might just be an argument for just adding, can so just changing 'na' and nothing else in the sort of world of the text might just be a way of highlighting, why not to just do that if that makes sense. So it could be argued both ways but I'm probably trying to think too much about second-guessing the author's point and trying to second-guess what's, what the message is [….]

Secondly, Rich questioned the impact of introducing a neutral pronoun into a binary context. That is, without revising the underlying bias, a neutral pronoun might essentially be ineffective. As Rich explained, 'you could call everyone "na" and women could still be oppressed'. Linguistic change, according to the participant's reading of the text, can be seen as trivial without wider social change. Jennie added:

Jennie: I think you're right

Rich: What do you mean?

Jennie: I think you're right, I agree that it's, yeah it could be a thing about, will just changing pronouns actually change anything cause obviously like in this text the concepts of 'man' and 'woman' and the associations of like negative and positive gender are still like really present so I think you're right

Jennie agreed with Rich's interpretation. Moreover, she reflected that the novel might support the argument that linguistic change is insignificant: 'in this text the concepts of "man" and "woman" and the associations of like negative and positive gender are still like really present'. As 'female' and 'male' continue to be associated with certain norms and expectations, 'na' seems an ineffective leveller.

Martina from the pilot group raised another concern. To her, the use of a neutral pronoun was not just potentially unproductive, but problematic. As she remarked:

> Actually to come to the point for me is that I think there was an episode of, not violence, but something similar that was going to happen to the girl, when the girl is named and I think this is important because you don't want to get this violence lost. Cause it was violence or threats or whatever from, done by specific people who were male on a specific person that I think I

understood from the story, but I'm not sure, was female. And I think that if you kind of mix all the pronouns up and everything, this might get lost which is something important to bear in mind

Martina argued that 'na' might veil 'violence or threats' initiated by 'specific people who were male' and directed against 'a specific person that […] was female'. She explained: 'if you kind of mix all the pronouns up and everything, this might get lost'; that is, speakers might no longer be aware of the specificity of sex/gender-based violence. And this loss, according to Martina, is 'something important to bear in mind' when considering a revision of pronouns. She elaborated her position further:

And I'm very gender-conscious and I'd like to get rid of all the pronouns and everything but there are points in which you need to be strategic about the use of pronouns. And if this is the way people actually make sense of reality, then let's use the terms they use. And let's try and change the perspectives and the stereotypes rather than, when they're ready then we'll get rid of the pronouns

So while Martina aligned herself with proponents of linguistic change, she feels that in this instance 'you need to be strategic'. To support her argument, Martina appealed to dominant language use: 'if this is the way people actually make sense of reality, then let's use the terms they use'. This is interesting, as it effectively counteracts her statement: 'I'd like to get rid of all the pronouns'. She explained this conflict by arguing that social norms need to change before language can follow. Therefore, changing language is secondary to revising social disparities: 'let's try and change the perspectives and the stereotypes rather than, when they're ready then we'll get rid of the pronouns'. Again, 'Language is a Trivial Concern' was employed to support the respondent's position.

As a more positive response, focus group participants also reflected on language alerting them to norms to begin with. Sarah from the first native English group argued: 'it immediately kind of leaps out of the page; you have to work out why that word has been substituted and what it's meant to mean and then therefore what are the implications of doing that'. That is, the use of the neutral pronoun led the participant to consider the 'implications'. Equally, Mandy from the second native English group felt the experience of reading the text challenged categorisation: 'to sort of make you question your own idea of what that profession necessarily like is male or female'.

Neutral language use was therefore not only considered trivial but also a useful tool to raise awareness around linguistic norms. Nevertheless, the dominant discourse across all focus groups questioned the effectiveness of linguistic revision – confirming that 'Language is a Trivial Concern' continues to play a key role in the perceptions of focus group respondents.

5. To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life?

Despite linguistic and contextual differences, the responses of English and German focus group participants highlight many similarities in their discourse. Participants were generally averse to the neutral language presented in *The Cook and the Carpenter*. To justify their position, respondents predominantly appealed to one of three categories identified by Parks and Roberton: 'Tradition', 'Change is Too Difficult' and 'Language is a Trivial Concern'.

Of course, one reason for this response might be the use of the unfamiliar pronoun 'na'. As Jennie from the first native English group stated: 'I would have been interested to see what it would have been like if they'd just used "they" instead cause then it doesn't, cause it's having to get used to a whole new word'. The novelty of 'na' might have therefore shaped the position of readers and needs to be taken into account.

The history of the Swedish pronoun 'hen' provides a point of comparison. First suggested in the 1960s, the pronoun had a turbulent past. However, as Sendén et al.'s study showed, speakers' resistance softened over time – which is reflected by the pronoun's inclusion in the dictionary today. As Wittgenstein claims: '[c]oncepts lead us to make investigations; are the expression of our interests and direct our interests' (1998: 151); ('Begriffe leiten uns zu Untersuchungen. Sind der Ausdruck unseres Interesses, und lenken unser Interesse'). New terminology can be a starting point for a new 'interest'. And even if imagining a new language does not necessarily lead to imagining a new 'form of life' straight away, it can 'guide' speakers to consider its possibility. This guidance, in turn, can sow the seeds for wider linguistic change.

The responses of focus group participants illustrate the impact of such a seed. While respondents might have predominantly rejected the neutral terminology presented in Arnold's novel, their discourse also showed first signs of reconsidering linguistic practices. Fiction can play a role in supporting this process – as Martina from the pilot group summarised: 'even if we don't understand what they're talking about, we're getting frustrated, we're getting angry, we're kind of engaging with the text. And I think that's the whole point about texts and that's how things can perhaps change when you come across something like this'. That is, the exposure to a new language in a literary format can prompt reflection on both norms and alternatives.

In a similar vein, it was the use of the Swedish pronoun 'hen' in a recent children's book which revived debates. Encountering 'na' in *The Cook and the Carpenter* also stimulated discussion among focus group participants. In particular, the neutral pronoun encouraged respondents to reflect on the linguistic status quo. I believe this awareness-raising potential of *The Cook and the Carpenter* renders it a valuable tool to examine linguistic norms and potential alternatives. The novel enables readers to experience a new language and, by extension, a new 'form of life'. In particular, the transporting function of fiction encourages readers to engage with this new perspective.

However, as participants' responses across the focus groups also showed, this engagement needs to be facilitated in order to be effective. To ensure that readers do not abandon the text due to 'frustration' and 'confusion', shared exploration is paramount. In the context of a group setting readers can exchange views and gain a deeper understanding. And this, in turn, can help to prompt them to reconsider linguistic norms. Based on the findings of my study, I propose that *The Cook and the Carpenter* is a valuable resource for educational settings. In a guided environment the novel can help to illustrate the issue of sex/gender and language. And through the fictional encounter with an alternative to dominant practices, readers can gain a direct insight into the importance of neutral/inclusive language. This experience can help to support calls for linguistic change. By raising awareness of the issue of sex/gender and language, the novel can help to open up a space for discussion and imagination, and thereby help to further promote neutral/inclusive language use.

Future studies could build on these results by investigating how readers' attitudes toward neutral/inclusive language are revised after reading *The Cook and the Carpenter*. Taking my qualitative results as a basis, researchers could assess the short- and long-term effects of the novel from a quantitative perspective. Additionally, researchers could diversify and increase samples to explore how speakers who hold negative attitudes toward non-sexist language respond to the novel. They could also employ other texts which experiment with neutral/inclusive language, such as Bryant's *The Kin of Ata Are Waiting for You*. A reading group setting focused on the whole novel could bring comparative insights to my findings.

Arnold's text aptly illustrates Wittgenstein's premise 'to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life' – and as my research shows, this illustration provides fruitful ground for educational application as well as further research.

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