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# Commentary

# Language problems with phobia terms and LGBTQIA+ prejudices using the example of *homophobia*

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## ABSTRACT

Communication is an elementary component of human coexistence. Thanks to our language, we can formulate thoughts and ideas and pass them on to others. However, with this also comes a certain responsibility. This article describes the concept of *homophobia*. For example, the UEFA Euro 2020 was minting by politics and protests about LGBTQIA+ rights as well as racism. There were both pro and contra protests and the concept of *homophobia* emerged as a big issue. That should be reason enough to revisit the term itself. The aim of this article is to explain why the term is already a problem in itself. The article reflects the opinion of the authors and are intended to simulate discussions.

*Keywords:* gender-neutral language; *homophobia*; *homosexism*; inclusive language; language

## 1. Introduction

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the UEFA Euro 2020 moved to summer 2021. On the occasion of the 60th anniversary, the sports tournament was not held in one or two countries, as is usually the case, but in selected cities in various countries across Europe[1]. In addition to Germany, England and France, the selected countries also included Hungary and Azerbaijan[2]. These countries are not only criticized for their controversial LGBTQIA+[1] legislation[3]. Because of this, it's not surprising that there were many votes for LGBTQIA+ rights over the course of the tournament. For example, many team captains wore a rainbow-colored captain's armband. These included Manuel Neuer (Germany), Harry Kane (England) and Georginio Wijnaldum (The Netherlands)[4]. On the other hand, many homophobic voices also got louder. UEFA has not covered itself with glory either. For example, the organization prohibited the Munich Allianz Arena from shining in rainbow colors during some matches (see **Figure 1**)[5].

In retrospect, reporters and journalists talk about a tournament that was very much characterized by gestures and symbols, both positive and negative[6]. UEFA 2020 is just one example. In general, we observe

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[1] LGBTQIA+ stands for **L**esbian, **G**ay, **B**isexual, **T**ranssexual, **Q**ueer, **I**ntersex, and **A**sexual (**A**-Spectrum). The + includes humans who do not belong to any of the groups mentioned before or who do not (want to) be assigned to any of these groups. The groups are personified by pride flags.

**Figure 1.** The Allianz Arena in Munich, Germany. The arena has been the home arena of the German soccer club 1. FC Bayern München since the 2005/2006 season. During the UEFA Euro 2020, the arena was the venue for a total of 4 matches (3 preliminary round matches, 1 quarterfinals) as well as the home stadium of the German national team (Group F). The illustration here shows the Allianz Arena in rainbow colors. The picture was taken during the Christopher Street Day 2020 (parades and official events were cancelled due to COVID-19). The arena was not allowed to be illuminated in these colors during the UEFA Euro. The picture comes from the official website of FC Bayern München (https://fcbayern.com/de/news/2020/07/fcb-unterstuetzt-christopher-street-day---allianz-arena-in-regenbogenfarben).
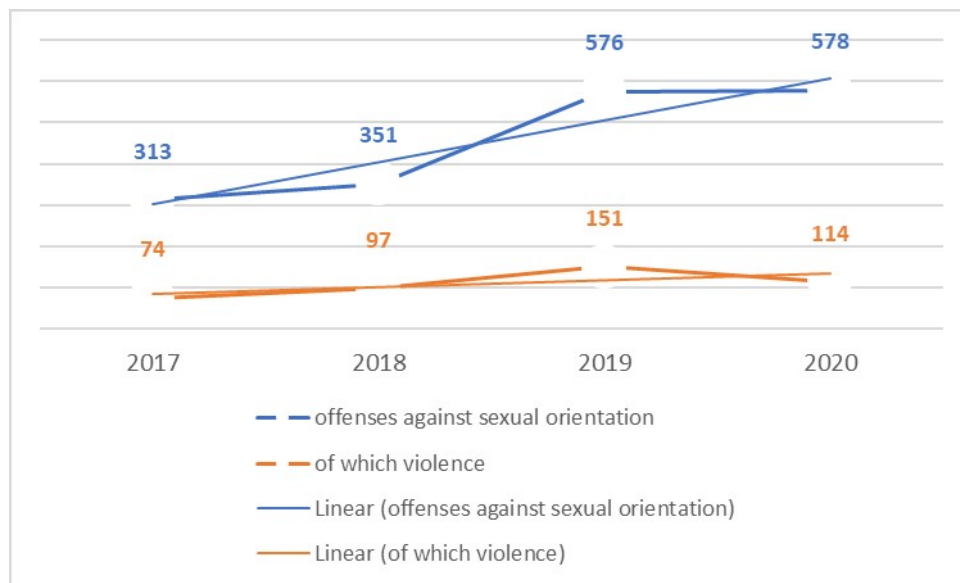


**Figure 2.** The development of the offenses against the sexual orientation in Germany since 2017. The numbers for 2021 are still missing. While the blue graph shows all crimes, the brown one only focuses on the violent offenses. These are obviously also part of the total number of crimes. Trend lines illustrate the positive trend in development. The numbers used here were retrieved from the German Lesben- und Schwulenverband. See footnote 2 for more information.

an increase in criminal and violent acts against the sexual orientation. **Figure 2** shows the increase of crimes against sexual orientation from 2017 to 2020 in Germany. Acts of violence, such as bodily harm, are mentioned

again separately.[2] This data shows that homophobic crimes, as well as crimes against sexual orientation, are increasing and becoming a growing problem. This development must be stopped. An important side information is that many homophobic people, mostly men, often only address gay men with their comments. Lesbians are approached less often and taken less seriously. Apart from that, female homosexuality is often sexualized by men. In the case of offenses that go beyond insults, the ratio is the same again[7]. Since language also influences our thinking[8,9], the concept of the term *homophobia* should be discussed in general.

## 2. The power of language

Before going into more detail about gender-neutral language and the term *homophobia*, language in general should be considered. Today, we know that the use of (special) language has an influence on perception and culture[10]. These findings are based on the research of several decades. As early as the 1980s and 1990s, authors from a wide variety of disciplines reported on the importance of inclusive language in essays and other contributions. For example, in 1993, Blaska examined the role of language for people with disabilities and concluded that inclusive language (also referred to as "person first" in this context) not only enhances the self-confidence of those affected, but can also change the perspective of view of the users of that language[11].

Language also plays an important role in the discussion about the inclusion of First Nation People (for example, in Australia, Canada or New Zealand). The Australian Parliament writes in its *Reconciliation Action Plan* handout that "using respectful and inclusive language and terminology is an essential component of reconciliation. The ways we speak about reconciliation is just as important as the ways we act: language is itself active, and can impact on attitudes, understandings and relationships in a very real and active sense". In their handout, it becomes clear that even slight changes in language (for example, using *Aborigines* instead of *Aboriginal*) can trigger various negative reactions and abuses among those affected. Furthermore, this handout shows how highly complex inclusive language is[12].

The role of inclusive language is also increasing in medicine. This can generally be seen as part of the new efforts of gender medicine. The goal of gender medicine is the medical visibility of LGBTQIA+ minorities as well as women. Traditionally, men have played a more important role in medical research. For example, drugs are more likely to be tested on men than on women. However, because both differ in their physiology, drugs may have different (side) effects in women than in men. If there is a lack of data and thus a lack of knowledge, medical emergencies can quickly arise (for example, due to incorrect dosages). Medical emergencies such as heart attacks also differ in their symptoms between men and women[13]. For this reason, the role of gender medicine has been visibly increasing recently. Inclusive language is a key part of this development. For a health doctor-patient relationship, the right approach is crucial. This relationship can benefit from correct inclusive language or can be negatively affected by its absence.

It is for reasons like these that linguistic measures are currently playing an increasingly important role and that gender-neutral language is gaining prominence in society[14]. Many languages use a generic masculine, regardless of the language family[15]. Today, we know that the use of generic masculine has the potential to exclude women and other genders or to make women and other genders feel unaddressed[16–18]. Knowing that

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[2] The primary source of the numbers used here is the German Lesben- und Schwulenverband (Lesbian and Gay Association). The numbers themselves come from various government reports and statistics compiled by the LSVD. Since 2020, criminal offenses have been examined more closely in various thematic areas. Crimes against queer people are now considered separately from crimes against homosexual people. According to presumptions, the number of unreported cases is approximately 80% to 90%. Available online: https://www.lsvd.de/de/ct/2445-Homophobe-Gewalt-Angriffe-auf-Lesben-Schwule-bisexuelle-trans-und-intergeschlechtliche-Menschen-LSBTI (accessed on 17 July 2021).

language influences our perceptions as well as our culture and the way we confront others, discussions such as those about gender-neutral language are important[19].

## 3. The history of gender-neutral language

Gender-neutral language, also known as gender-equal language, first appeared in English literature in 1973. U.S. linguist Lakoff studied men and women and their different language as part of the second wave of the women's movement. The study, "Language and woman's place", showed how women's disadvantaged position in social spheres was both expressed and affirmed. From this work, the discipline of gender linguistics (probably) formed. At the very least, Lakoff's "Language and woman's place" provided an important impetus[20].

In English, there are only a few nouns that have a gender (*mistress*, *actress*, and *princess*). As a rule, nouns are gender-neutral. However, the feminine form of a noun can be considered derogatory to the masculine form. For this reason, the usefulness of these feminine terms is increasingly diminishing and is encountered less and less frequently in common usage. The situation is different with pronouns. Here, too, critical studies are available from as early as 1973. The study "Does sex-biased job advertising 'aid and abet' sex discrimination?" examined the influence of gender-specific job advertisements[21]. In 1975, the study "Androcentrism in prescriptive grammar" recorded the British state's enforcement of the pronoun *he* as a generic form of address in 1850[22]. Beginning in the mid-2010s, *they* began to spread for addressing nonbinary persons. *They* as a singular form of address is found as early as the 14th century. Somewhat earlier (around the turn of the millennium), *Mx* appeared as a gender-neutral form of address. Other new world creation is, for example, *ze*.

Other languages that strive for gender-neutral language are German, French, Finnish, Spanish, and Thai[23–25].

The discussion about gender-neutral language shows how important and topical the discussions and debates about our languages are. Language influences our perception and our culture. But because of these influences, we are of the opinion that the discussion about language should be expanded to include some more aspects.

## 4. The history of the term *homosexism*

The term at the center of this consideration is *homophobia*.[3] The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines *homophobia* as *a fear or dislike of gay people*[26]. This already shows the problem, since in the definition fear is equated and mixed up with rejection. This applies to the English language as well as to other common languages such as German (*Homophobie*), Dutch (*Homofobie*) or French (*Homophobie*). According to *Cambridge Dictionary*, the term *phobia* describes *an extreme fear of something*[27]. For this reason, and since language affects us all, the choice of the term *phobia* for the motivation of crimes is very suboptimal. This suggests that crimes are more likely to happen out of fear than rejection, which in turn affects the perception about the perpetrator. Fearful acts are likely to be forgiven more easily than otherwise motivated acts. We are of the opinion that terms such as *homophobia* should also become part of the current language discussion and should be replaced by better terms if necessary. In the case of *homophobia*, there is already a good alternative.[4]

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[3] The term *homophobia* is also used here as an example. The arguments used here can also be transferred to terms such as *queerphobia*, *transphobia* or *xenophobia*.
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For the reasons mentioned above, the term *homosexism* would be a good alternative, originally proposed to more accurately reflect a prejudice rather than a *phobia* implied by *homophobia*[28]. The *Urban Dictionary* defines *homosexism* as *the stereotyping of homosexuals*; the belief that heterosexuals are superior to homosexuals[29]. 5 Since *Urban Dictionary* can be edited freely by everyone, the definitions sometimes appeared unprofessional. Nevertheless, this definition is already very close to the original definition of *homophobia*. The original term comes from Gregory Lehne, who first used this term in the book *The Forty-Nine Percent Majority: The Male Sex Role*[29]. Since *homosexism* describes the same facts as *homophobia*, but dispenses with the strong character of *phobia*, this term is ultimately better suited to describe homophobic crimes and homophobic acts. In our opinion, this should also become a part of the current discourse about gender-neutral and inclusive language.

## 5. LGBTQIA+ prejudices and words

As described earlier, our language shapes our perception of the world. This, of course, also plays a role in prejudice against LGBTQIA+ people. **Figure 2** shows the development of the offenses against the sexual orientation. But the dark figure, especially for smaller offenses like insults, should be estimated as much higher (as well as the general dark figure for offenses against sexualities). Among younger people, terms such as *gay* (as well as *disabled* or *Jew*) are again widespread as swear words. From a legal point of view, the question is at what point neutral terms such as *gay* counts as insults. Here, the context plays a decisive role. The decisive factor is that the user in such a case is obviously interested in emphasizing the clichéd, traditional, supposedly negative traits associated with the respective designation. The example of the term *gay* is, for example, a certain effimancy or feminity. The jurist Dr. René Rosenau writes: "It proves to be particularly infamous that the use of such terms as insults not only affects the person concerned, but also all those who are actually gay, physically handicapped or, for example, belong to the Jewish religious community. Apparently, many of those affected are nevertheless inhibited to defend themselves against such statements by means of criminal and/or civil law, probably because they fear otherwise being exposed to the accusation of having prejudices themselves."[31].

Language influences our thinking, also in the sense of the LGBTQIA+ movement. In "Language influences mass opinion toward gender and LGBT equality", the authors Tavits and Pérez address this very question and analyze three survey experiments[32]. They come to similar conclusions that other authors mentioned in this commentary have already made. Gender-neutral language has the potential to reduce prejudice and bias against LGBTQIA+ minorities and to increase tolerance in general. However, the authors also note that linguistic aspects should not be considered in isolation. Cultural aspect should not be underestimated. They ultimately conclude their findings by stating that the use of gender-neutral language positively influences tolerance by decreasing the cognitive salience of males (and increasing the salience of nonmales)[32]. The work was published in PNAS, one of the most prestigious journals in the world. This also shows how relevant this discussion ultimately is.

## 6. Conclusion and lessons for the future

The discussion about gender-neutral and inclusive language is an important part of our modern society. But in this debate, the focus is too much on the debate about the generic masculine. In this context, terms like *homophobia*, *queerphobia* or even *xenophobia* play a no less important and central role. Especially terms

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5 *Urban Dictionary* is an online dictionary of English slang words. Similar to Wikipedia, for example, entries are freely created by users. In the case of *homosexism*, it should be noted that the definition of the term has changed significantly over the years. In 2013, *homosexism* was described as discrimination against heterosexuals (practically *heterophobia*). More recent definitions practically turn this around and describe *homosexism* as stereotyping against homosexuals, so it is much closer to *homophobia*. Since the different entries on the same page are given with different dates, we use the indication *n.d.* for the reference list.

ending in *-phobia* are powerful words that are able to influence senders as well as receivers. With the addition of *-phobia*, worldviews such as racism of *homosexism* are likely to be seen more positively than they should be, even indirectly without conscious awareness. For this reason, the debate should be broadened to include more inclusive language. Terms such as homophobic should receive equivalent the same attention as generic masculine. Not least because homosexist acts, whether laws by states or criminal acts by individuals, are on the rise. But an additional focus on terms like *homophobia* should also benefit the debate about gender-neutral language. Currently, the debate is still either smiled at, not taken seriously, or even hindered by many people. At the same time, quite a few people also act aggressively. A debate about terms like *homophobia* should meet with more approval than the debate about the generic masculine. In this way, the reputation of the debate in general could be strengthened.

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Conceptualization, YB and AE; literature research, YB and AE; writing–original draft preparation, YB; writing—review & editing, YB and AE.

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## Conflict of interest

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