Beyond asterisks and underlines
Rethinking typographic gender representation in the German language through visual alternatives

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Place and Date
Biel/Bienne, July 24, 2025

Signature
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Table of contents

Abstract

This thesis explores how gender-inclusive language can be visually supported and expanded through typography. Focusing on the German language, it examines how grammatical gender, societal norms, and linguistic habits intersect—and how these intersections become visible, and negotiable, through type design. While the grammatical structure of German enforces binary thinking, typographic interventions can open up new spaces for inclusion, visibility, and transformation.

The research combines linguistic analysis, design theory, and practical experiments. Drawing on workshops, surveys, and conversations with designers, type creators, and activists, the project investigates existing strategies and develops new non-binary glyphs. These visual experiments are tested for functionality, readability, and conceptual clarity. Rather than offering a fixed solution, the work understands itself as a starting point: a visual and theoretical exploration of what gender-inclusive design can be.

The thesis also reflects on the lack of standards, awareness, and implementation in current typographic systems. It highlights the importance of collective authorship, open tools, and collaborative formats.

Typography is never neutral. It carries meaning, reflects power structures, and shapes how language is perceived. This work shows how typographic design can contribute to the ongoing negotiation of language—offering visibility, questioning norms, and creating space for more voices to be seen, read, and recognized.

As a result, it proposes the creation of an open platform as a digital space that brings together research, tools, and visual material—supporting designers and educators who want to engage with inclusive typographic practices.

«Es scheint mir oft, als würde der Fokus bei genderinklusiver Sprache zu sehr auf die Hoffnung eines einzigen perfekten Gebrauchs gesetzt werden. Sprache wird jedoch in so vielen Kontexten und Medien verwendet, ausgedrückt und festgehalten, dass es kaum Sinn macht, sich so zu beschränken. Es darf ruhig auch Spass machen!»

Jules H.

«Die Nichtnennung der nichtmaskulinen Menschen ist nicht nur unhöflich, sondern hat bewusst oder unbewusst ein Mindset verankert, in dem nur das männliche Prinzip vorkommt. Mit massiven Auswirkungen in alle Bereiche und Strukturen des Lebens: Gesellschaft, Politik, Lohnfragen, Forschung, Mitwirkung, etc. Hier kann Sprache mithelfen, das Bewusstsein für diese Ungerechtigkeit zu schärfen.»

Sven W.

«Ich nutze den Doppelpunkt. Ich finde, er integriert sich optisch besser. in den Text und ist neben der inhaltlichen Diskussion auch praktischer in der Anwendung: (Umschalttaste) und Taste (:) ist für mich irgendwie einfacher zum Tippen als (Umschalttaste) und Taste (3).»[1]

Evelyne R.

[1] *Statements taken from my Survey about Nutzung von genderinklusiven Formen in der deutschen Sprache (Use of gender-inclusive forms in the German language) April 2025*

Introduction:
Language as Design Space

When I was growing up, it was still common to address young women as *Fräulein* (Miss). Although this term officially discouraged in Switzerland since the 1970s[2], it persisted for decades. Language habits change slowly. In 1983, the newspaper WoZ introduced the Binnen-I as a visible gesture toward gender equality.[3] We were so proud to use it—our teachers were less pleased. In 1994, the Federal Chancellery published the first *Leitfaden zur sprachlichen Gleichbehandlung im Deutschen*[4] *(Guide to Gender-Equal Language)*, banning the term *Fräulein* from official documents, while the generic masculine (*Schweizer Bürger)* remained standard.

Later, other developments made headlines. In 2013, the University of Leipzig adopted the generic feminine[5] in its statutes—prompting intense media reactions, including the (false) claim that professors would now be addressed as *Herr Professorin* (Mr. Female Professor).[6] [7]

Today, dual forms like *Liebe Bürgerinnen und Bürger* are common, but truly neutral solutions remain contested. In 2024, the Bavarian cabinet banned gender asterisks in schools.[8] And in Switzerland, symbols like the colon or underscore remain excluded from federal language guidelines[9], though some cities like Zurich and Basel[10] allow inclusive markers in official documents. Meanwhile, younger communities create their own forms as they talk of *Mitbewohnis instead of Mitbewohnern* (roommates), or *Herzensmensch* (person of the heart) to reflect new ways of naming relationships.

What connects all of this? These examples show that language not only communicates but reflects norms, power, and is deeply interwoven with societal questions. As linguist Noah Bubenhofer states: “We all use language, and that’s why we

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[2] Bundeskanzlei der Schweizerischen Eidgenossenschaft (1972).

[3] Landolt, N, WoZ (2013).

[4] Bundeskanzlei (1994).

[5] Universität Leipzig (2013).

[6] Haerdle B. (2013).

[7] Deutschlandfunk (2014)

[8] Bayerische Staatsregierung (2024).

[9] Schweizerische Bundeskanzlei (2023).

[10] Kanton Basel-Stadt, Präsidialdepartement (2021).

all have an opinion on this topic."[11] Because language shapes identity, debates about inclusive forms often become deeply emotional, touching on belonging and recognition.[12]

Despite legal options to register as male, female, diverse, or undefined, in Germany 2018[13] and despite updates to the *Duden*, there is still no shared standard across German-speaking regions—especially regarding visual implementation. In contrast to French-speaking areas, where experimental design solutions like new glyphs and typefaces have been actively developed for nearly a decade.[14] [15]

So this thesis asks, what role can typography play in rethinking gender representation in the German language? What visual strategies and glyph-based solutions can support more inclusive forms of expression?

Following Halberstam's call for failure and illegibility as tools for critique[16], I explore language not only as a system of meaning, but also as a designed surface—one that can be reshaped and questioned. My approach is intentionally multi-layered. I draw from feminist linguistics and queer theory, but also from typographic practice, visual experimentation, and collective conversations. I conducted a survey, hosted a workshop, analyzed publications, and developed new glyph systems.

This project does not aim to provide one fixed solution. Instead, it explores how design and language intersect—and how this intersection can open space for other ways of reading, speaking, and presentation. I believe that language can change visibility, and visual signs can change legibility. Both can shape how we experience the world—and both can be designed.

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[11] O'Sullivan, D. (2021).

[12] SRF. (2022).
SRF. (2023).

[13] Antidiskriminierungsstelle des Bundes. (n.d.).

[14] HEAD–Genève (2018)

[15] Breitner, E. (2024).

[16] *Halberstam proposes failure, illegibility, and open-endedness as productive modes of critique that resist normative structures and enable alternative imaginaries.*
Halberstam, J. (2011). The queer art of failure. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

State of the Art and Theoretical Discourse

GENDER IN GERMAN: GRAMMATICAL STRUCTURES AND INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

The German language has a complex grammatical structure. It has three grammatical genders: masculine, feminine, and neuter. These grammatical genders, however, have no direct relationship to the biological or social gender of a subject. Thus, *ein Becher* (a mug) is masculine *der Becher, eine Tasse* (a cup) is feminine *die Tasse*, and *ein Glas* (a glass) is neuter *das Glas*. This grammatical independence of gender becomes particularly clear with the case *das Kind* (the child)—a neutral category for a person whose biological gender is usually very well known. Compared to other languages like Finnish, which has no grammatical gender, or English, where gender is mostly marked in pronouns. German is much more gender-marked across articles, nouns, adjectives, and pronouns. Nouns like *Studentinnen/Studenten* (students) or pronouns like *er* (he) or *sie* (she), possessive forms like *sein* (his) or *ihre* (her), and indefinite pronouns like *jeder* (everyone) or *mancher* (some) implicitly carry gender attributions, even when gender isn't relevant[17]. Traditionally, the masculine form has been used as the so-called generic form, and meant to represent all genders. (Fig. 1)

While gender-inclusive language is often seen as a recent development of the last few decades, I found historical examples of naming both genders—male and femal. In 19th-century legal texts and administrative documents, forms such as *Koufeler und Koufelerin* (male and female buyers) or *Müller und Müllerin* (male and female millers) appear as early examples of linguistic differentiation[18]. These instances show that the idea of making both genders visible in language is not new, even if these forms were never fully integrated into everyday spoken German.

In the 1970s, German feminist linguistics—strongly inspired by the civil rights and women's movements in the United States—began to address gender-sensitive

[17] Stefanowitsch, A. (2017).

[18] Dietz, G. (2021.).

Fig. 1: Schema of language types I–III and their respective effects on gender, based on a model by Anatol Stefanowitsch (Symposium LMU).

language more actively. A central figure in this time in the German-speaking area was Luise F. Pusch, a German linguist, who promoted feminist writing and introduced the so-called *Binnen-I:* a capital "I" positioned between the stem and the word ending for example *StudentInnen*[19] (students). She proposed it as a visual strategy to represent both genders. In the late 1980s, this and other forms such as notation with slash *Student/-innen* (students) as well as dual naming *Studenten und Studentinnen* (male and female students) were more and more used by activism, academia, and journalism[20] before companies began integrating gender-sensitive language into their guidelines and communication policies in the 1990s.

Today, a range of linguistic forms exist that pursue different strategies from traditional masculine form to either highlight gender diversity or neutralize it:

1. Generic masculine: *Student*
2. Dual naming with "Binnen-I" (early 1980s, L. Push and C. Busch): *StudentIn*
3. Generic feminine *(1980s, L. Push)*: *Studentin*
4. Dual naming with Slash (Late 1980s): *Student/-in*
5. De-gender (mid 1990s, entgendern nach Phettberg): *Study*
6. Dual naming (early 2000s): *Studentinnen und Studenten*
7. Gender-inclusive with markers (early 2010):
   *Student_in, Student:in, Student*in, Student•in*
8. Gender-neutral (early 2010): *Studierende*
9. *G*ender-free (2015 ongoing): Studens, *Studx, Study*[21] [22]

According to the official language guidelines of the Swiss Federal Administration[23], only options 4, 6 and 8 are approved for official documents. (Fig. 2) Where possible, the gender-neutral options like *Studierende* are preferred. One problem with these gender-neutral forms is that they often involve newly constructed words, for example, *Verkaufende* (sellers)*, which* only function in plural and can reduce clarity. Even when grammatically correct, for example, *Die Studierenden sind in den Ferien. Die Professorinnen und Professoren ebenfalls*—such gender-inclusive forms may

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[19] Pusch, L. F. (1984).

[20] *The Binnen-I was first introduced in 1983 by the Swiss newspaper WoZ as a typographic signal for gender equality. Their editorial policy reflects an early engagement with inclusive language.*
Landolt, N, WoZ (2013).

[21] Dick, A.-K., Drews, M., Pickard, V., & Pierz, V. (2023).

[22] Hornscheidt, L., & Sammla, J. (2021).

[23] Bundeskanzlei der Schweizerischen Eidgenossenschaft (2024).

Sprachengesetz

Artikel 7 Absatz 1 des Sprachengesetzes verpflichtet die Bundesbehörden, sich um eine sachgerechte, klare und bürgerfreundliche Sprache zu bemühen und auf geschlechtergerechte Formulierungen zu achten.

Kreative Lösung

In Texten des Bundes werden die vorhandenen sprachlichen Mittel des geschlechtergerechten Formulierens situationsbezogen so verwendet, dass ihre Vorteile zum Tragen kommen und ihre Nachteile möglichst minimiert werden.

Sprachliche Mittel

In deutschsprachigen Texten des Bundes kommen die folgenden sprachlichen Mittel des geschlechtergerechten Formulierens zum Einsatz:

– Paarformen	*Stimmbürgerinnen und Stimmbürger*
– substantivierte Adjektive/Partizipien	*Stimmberechtigte*
– geschlechtsunspezifische Nomen	*Personen mit Stimmrecht*
– Kollektivbezeichnungen	*Stimmbevölkerung*
– Umschreibungen ohne Personenbezeichnungen	

Das generische Maskulinum ist nicht zulässig.

Sparschreibungen

In verknapptem Text (z. B. in Formularen, Fussnoten, Klammern und Tabellen) kann die folgende Sparschreibung verwendet werden:

– Kurzformen mit Schrägstrich	*Stimmbürger/-innen*

Die folgenden Schreibweisen sind nicht zulässig:

– Kurzformen mit Klammern	*Stimmbürger(innen)*
– Kurzformen mit Binnen-I	*StimmbürgerInnen*
– Kurzformen mit Genderzeichen (Asterisk, Doppelpunkt usw.)	*Stimmbürger*innen* *Stimmbürger:innen*

Fig. 2: Overview from the official language guidelines of the Swiss Federal Administration.

affect readability and disrupt fluency, particularly when the visual structure becomes more complex.[24] [25]

A major criticism of these solutions is that people who do not identify with any binary gender still remain excluded. Inclusive markers like asterisk or similar signs emerged to address this problem, aiming to linguistically include everyone.

As Lann Hornscheidt points out, "Many people experience the idea of being perceived as a gender at all as a violent imposition."[26] Instead, Hornscheidt advocates for the possibility of self-chosen, gender-neutral forms that exist beyond the binary of male and female. Examples of such practices include terms like *Mitarbeitx,* endings like *-ens* and pronouns such as *sier*, d*ey,* or *ens*. These forms deliberately break with linguistic convention to open up new spaces for identity and thought. A similar idea was proposed by Hermes Phettberg in the 1990s, who called for the complete abolition of grammatical gender. His suggestion was to introduce the generic *y* as in *Mitarbeity* as a universal ending.[27]

In debates about inclusive forms in German, such proposals may seem like radical outsider positions but precisely for that reason, they are valuable. They expose the limits of current solutions and encouraging to think beyond what is already established. Even though *Duden* has now published initial recommendations and rule sets (Fig. 3), many things remain in flux and there are still hardly any broadly accepted formulations that are widely used or standardized.

One ongoing concern is pronunciation. Some argue that gender-inclusive forms are difficult—if not impossible—to pronounce. To make them audible Luise F. Pusch recommends a *Glottisschlag* (glottal stop)[28], a short pause before the female ending. This pause is common in German, as in *Urinstinkt* (basic instinct), where a glottal stop follows *Ur*[29]. Without it, the phrase could be misheard as *Urin stinkt* (urine stinks). When this principle is transferred to gender-inclusive forms and the words are pronounced clearly—with a glottal stop instead of a slur—gender becomes audible e.g., *Professor(pause)innen*. This technique has been used sporadically

[24] Pädagogische Hochschule Zürich. (2020).

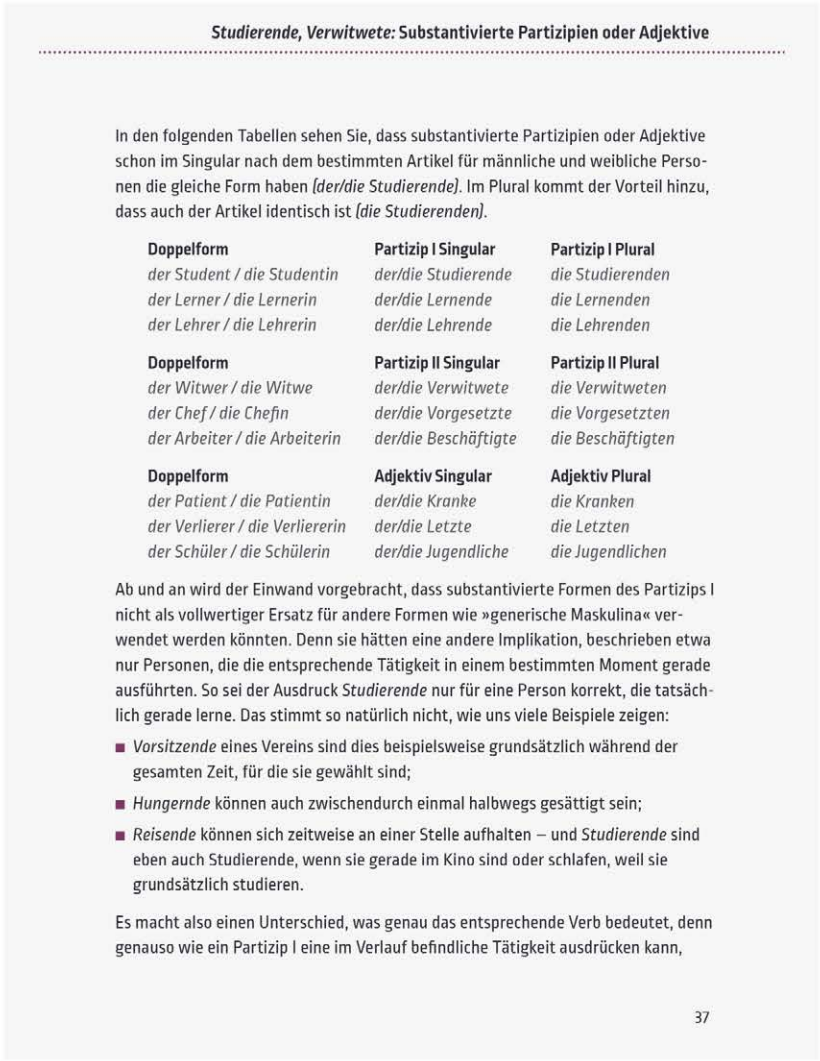
[25] Ebner, C. (2023, p.33ff).

[26] Hornscheidt, L., & Sammla, J. (2021, p.18ff).

[27] Kronschläger, T. (2022).

[28] Olderdissen, C. (2020).

[29] Faber, J. (2023).



***Studierende, Verwitwete:* Substantivierte Partizipien oder Adjektive**

In den folgenden Tabellen sehen Sie, dass substantivierte Partizipien oder Adjektive schon im Singular nach dem bestimmten Artikel für männliche und weibliche Personen die gleiche Form haben *(der/die Studierende)*. Im Plural kommt der Vorteil hinzu, dass auch der Artikel identisch ist *(die Studierenden)*.

Doppelform	**Partizip I Singular**	**Partizip I Plural**
der Student / die Studentin	*der/die Studierende*	*die Studierenden*
der Lerner / die Lernerin	*der/die Lernende*	*die Lernenden*
der Lehrer / die Lehrerin	*der/die Lehrende*	*die Lehrenden*

Doppelform	**Partizip II Singular**	**Partizip II Plural**
der Witwer / die Witwe	*der/die Verwitwete*	*die Verwitweten*
der Chef / die Chefin	*der/die Vorgesetzte*	*die Vorgesetzten*
der Arbeiter / die Arbeiterin	*der/die Beschäftigte*	*die Beschäftigten*

Doppelform	**Adjektiv Singular**	**Adjektiv Plural**
der Patient / die Patientin	*der/die Kranke*	*die Kranken*
der Verlierer / die Verliererin	*der/die Letzte*	*die Letzten*
der Schüler / die Schülerin	*der/die Jugendliche*	*die Jugendlichen*

Ab und an wird der Einwand vorgebracht, dass substantivierte Formen des Partizips I nicht als vollwertiger Ersatz für andere Formen wie »generische Maskulina« verwendet werden könnten. Denn sie hätten eine andere Implikation, beschrieben etwa nur Personen, die die entsprechende Tätigkeit in einem bestimmten Moment gerade ausführten. So sei der Ausdruck *Studierende* nur für eine Person korrekt, die tatsächlich gerade lerne. Das stimmt so natürlich nicht, wie uns viele Beispiele zeigen:

- *Vorsitzende* eines Vereins sind dies beispielsweise grundsätzlich während der gesamten Zeit, für die sie gewählt sind;
- *Hungernde* können auch zwischendurch einmal halbwegs gesättigt sein;
- *Reisende* können sich zeitweise an einer Stelle aufhalten – und *Studierende* sind eben auch Studierende, wenn sie gerade im Kino sind oder schlafen, weil sie grundsätzlich studieren.

Es macht also einen Unterschied, was genau das entsprechende Verb bedeutet, denn genauso wie ein Partizip I eine im Verlauf befindliche Tätigkeit ausdrücken kann,

37

Fig. 3: Overview from Gendern – ganz einfach!, illustrating the use of substantivized participles and adjectives as inclusive forms in German grammar.

by German public television since 2019[30]. *ARD Tagesthemen* experimented with it, receiving both praise and criticism[31]. In Switzerland, *Swiss Radio and Television (SRF)* introduced the glottal stop in 2021, mostly in youth and cultural programming.[32] [33] Though it's not officially required by *SRF*-guidelines, it's not forbidden either. As with written forms, its spoken use depends heavily on context and on who's speaking.

The overall uncertainty surrounding inclusive language, in its forms, usage, and acceptance, was also reflected in the results of my online survey (April 2025). Among 42 participants aged between 19 and 82, over 60% reported that they found double mentions or typographic markers like asterisks visually difficult and harder to read. At the same time, 68% supported the general use of gender-inclusive language, and 88% said they use it regularly—especially in writing, both professionally and privately. When it comes to spoken language, the most preferred forms were gender-neutral terms like Mitarbeitende and constructions with a short pause (glottal stop), such as Mitarbeiter*innen. Notably, 81% said they often or immediately notice when inclusive forms are missing—both in speech and in writing.

Since many of my contributors came from my own circle or university environment, this might explain why my survey reflects a growing awareness of gender-inclusive language across generations, along with a clear willingness to prioritize gender inclusion. At the same time, it also confirms that applying inclusive language in speech can sometimes be more complicated than using it in writing. If the survey had been conducted with a broader audience across Switzerland, the outcome would probably have been quite different.

[30] Genderleicht-Redaktion (n.d.)

[31] Stern-Redaktion (2021)

[32] Hensler, S. (2021).

[33] Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen (SRF), (n.d.).

IMPORTANT POSITIONS IN THE CURRENT DISCOURSE

When Luise F. Pusch and Senta Trömel-Plötz demanded consistent use of the feminine in the 1980s, it wasn't about offering a special solution but about creating a political counterweight to the entrenched dominance of the masculine generic.[34] They critiqued how the masculine has long been entrenched as the linguistic norm, not as neutral but as structurally exclusionary. In 1980/81, they co-published the first *Richtlinien zur Vermeidung sexistischen Sprachgebrauchs* in the science paper *Linguistische Berichte.* With this text they were initiating the feminist linguistics in Germany and from then on explicitly focusing on women's linguistic inclusion.[35]

Today, the discussion is broader and increasingly based on empirical research. A 2023 media analysis by Waldendorf, for example, documents a clear rise and typological diversification of gender-inclusive forms across major German media between 2000 and 2021[36]. Her study quantifies the use of inclusive language in five national sources and provides a solid data-driven foundation for ongoing debates.

The quantitative study by Müller-Spitzer in 2024 shows that less than one percent of words in German press texts would be affected by gender-inclusive language[37]. This minimal proportion challenges the often-repeated claim that inclusive forms significantly hinder understanding of news texts.

And the Psycholinguistic experiments by Jöckel confirm that inclusive speech forms, such as the glottal stop, have a measurable impact on gender representation in listeners.[38]

This aligns with linguist Anatol Stefanowitsch, who highlights the systematic bias in German, where the masculine form appears as the neutral norm, while everything that deviates from it—especially the feminine—is marked as an exception. This structural asymmetry runs through vocabulary, syntax, and grammatical conventions. Stefanowitsch argues that language doesn't just reflect inequality—it reproduces it. He writes: "...our language is, even in its structure—especially in its vocabulary—not designed for equal treatment..."[39]

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[34] Frauenmediaturm. (n.d.).

[35] Pusch, L.F. et al. (1980).

[36] Waldendorf, A. (2023).

[37] Müller-Spitzer, C. et al. (2024).

[38] Jöckel et al. (2023)

[39] Kolly, M.-J. (2023).

He also draws attention to the striking imbalance in the number of derogatory terms for marginalized groups compared to those not exposed to discrimination. This applies not only to gendered language but also to cultural and social categories[40]. Like Bourdieu and Fairclough before him, Stefanowitsch sees language not only as a mirror of society but as a mechanism that reinforces existing hierarchies.

He argues when female or non-binary forms are dismissed in public discourse as *awkward*, *unnecessary*, *complicated*, or even *ridiculous*, what becomes visible is a deeply rooted linguistic sexism—one that has social consequences[41].

Language bias doesn't stop at grammar, it extends into everyday metaphors, habitual thinking, tone, and the hierarchies of power that are mirrored and reinforced in how we speak. Pusch described in her doctoral thesis German as a *Militär- und Männersprache* (military and men's language)[42] to highlight the historically embedded dominance of masculine ways of expression and interpretation. Phrases like *sich für eine Prüfung wappnen* (to arm oneself for an exam), *etwas zielt darauf ab* (something targets a goal), *ein Projekt ins Visier nehmen* (to take aim at a project), *jemandem Paroli bieten* (to offer resistance), *schiess los, ich höre dir zu* (shoot, I'm listening) or *eine Diskussion ausfechten* (to fight out a discussion) are from military language and have quietly moved in civilian contexts. As Lakoff and Johnson argue in *Metaphors We Live By*[43], such metaphors shape our thinking. When we *defend a position* or *fire back,* we unconsciously frame debate as a kind of war. It's not only gendered grammar that requires rethinking, metaphors and everyday expressions also call for change.

This framing power of language became aswell visible during a workshop I ran with participants from literature, journalism, design, LGBTQI+ movements, and integration work. After the discussion on metaphor and structural bias, this was a chance to observe how deeply gendered associations continue to shape perception.

Split into two groups, participants were asked to sort and evaluate terms based on perceived gender associations—not necessarily their own, but those they had encountered in everyday usage. One group developed a fluid system that allowed for ambiguity, while the other leaned toward binary categorization.

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[40] Axel Springer Brand Studios/JWP (2019).

[41] Stefanowitsch, A. (2017)

[42] Pusch, L.F. (1984).

[43] Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (2003).

Words like s*tark* (strong), *einfühlsam* (empathetic), or *machtvoll* (powerful) were judged differently depending on their gender connotations. Masculine-coded terms tended to be seen more positively; feminine-coded ones more negatively.

Certain terms like *Verantwortung* (responsibility), *soziale Fähigkeiten* (social skills), or *Handlungskompetenz* (capacity for action), were viewed as largely gender-neutral. But even here, tendencies emerged. For example, *Einfühlsamkeit* (empathy) or S*ensibilität* (sensitivity) were often reported as being perceived differently depending on gender. These impressions weren't necessarily personal beliefs—they reflected common language usage the participants had experienced or observed. The same concept could be expressed with different synonyms depending on assumed gender. One would more likely say, *Er ist eine sensible Person* (he is a sensitive person) than *Er ist eine emotionale Person* (he is an emotional person). For women, it's often the other way round: *Sie ist eine emotionale Person* (she is an emotional person). The feminine-coded forms tend to carry more negative connotations.

These observations reinforce the insight that language influences how we think, shaping how we see the world and our place within it.

CHANGING THE FRAME: RETHINKING LANGUAGE AS SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The previous reflections make clear that simply using gender-inclusive forms does not automatically create fair or inclusive language. What is also needed is a shift in awareness. We need to stop reproducing gender stereotypes not only in language but also in imagery.

This relates closely with Judith Butler's concept of the performativity of gender, which suggests that gender is not something we are born with, but something that is continuously produced through language and action. In this view, language is not a neutral tool but an active force in shaping identity. When language is used differently, rethought, and reformed, it directly challenges established norms, perceptions of gender roles, and power structures[44].

Butler also emphasizes the importance of linguistic recognition for social participation. Gender diversity becomes visible not only through legal or biological measures, but most of all through language. If someone is not addressed or named, they remain invisible in many areas of public life: in education, in administration, and in everyday social interaction. This doesen't apply only to people who don't fit to binary gender norms but also to those with different cultural backgrounds or social experiences. Language determines who is included and who is systematically overlooked. The Swiss filmmaker, Sabian Baumann explores this dynamic in Who Owns the Sky[45], showing how visibility and linguistic participation can empower marginalized communities. The film connects critiques of binary gender systems with capitalist structures and is related to the art project *die grosse um_ordnung[46].*

To address problems like suppression, racism, and invisibility in everyday environment, the focus needs also to be drawn on established spaces like: mountain names, street signs, monuments, or characters in children's books. These elements all carry historical narratives that shape, often unconsciously, our understanding of who belongs to a society and who does not[47]. This constant assignment can become a Problem. Sara Ahmed shows how institutional and environmental signals carry silent biases. They normalize certain groups while excluding others, reinforcing inequality through habitual recognition[48].

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[44] Butler, J. (2024).

[45] Baumann, S. (Director). (2022).

[46] Die Grosse Um_Ordnung. (n.d.).

[47] Zollfreilager. (2024).

[48] Ahmed, S. (2012).

Social and political dynamics are also mirrored in gender-sensitive language and it's linguistic structures. This is evident in the reflections and research of sociologist Paula-Irene Villa Braslavsky[49]. She sees language as part of a broader system of social order and argues that changes in language are both a reflection and a driver of social transformation. Villa Braslavsky thematizes that gender cannot be viewed in isolation but must always be understood in relation to other social differences such as class, age, or cultural background[50]. The absence of linguistic terms for certain groups leads to their marginalization—a process that is especially evident for people who don't conform to traditional gender norms. She also mentions that gender cannot be viewed in isolation but must always be understood in relation to other social differences such as class, age, or cultural background. She explains how language shapes the way we are perceived and which roles are assigned to us through labels and terms, and how we are linked to dominant conceptions of gender.

As designers, we are confronted with these power structures at multiple levels. Not only is the history of design still male-dominated, but the language of our field is also shaped by gender bias. In typography and layout, many discriminatory or stereotypical terms persist. Emerging from the male-dominated world of typesetting, these expressions still influence professional discourse today. The term *Jungfrau* (virgin) refers to perfectly set text, *Deppenapostroph* (idiot's apostrophe) mocks so-called incorrect apostrophes and *Hurenkind* (literally: whore's child) describes a single line of a paragraph stranded at the top of a new page or column[51].

It's revealing what kinds of values and social imagery are being reproduced when these terms are still taught in design schools and passed on without reflection. This calls for critical engagement from within the design profession—especially from educators, typographers, and practitioners who shape how visual language is learned and used.

So how can we begin to shift this linguistic and visual setting—both conceptually and on the typographic surface?

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[49] Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (2021).

[50] Villa Braslavsky, P.-I. (2016).

[51] Schöning, P. (2009).

FROM LANGUAGE TO FORM: THE POTENTIAL OF VISUAL FORM

In the German-speaking context, the most common approach to gender-inclusive language has involved adding typographic characters to existing words. These symbols—taken from standard keyboards—are widely accessible and easy to apply, without requiring special fonts or additional glyphs. Their practicality has made them the dominant solution.

But this focus on technical workability also shows how limited the debate has remained. Most discussions still center around linguistic norms: word formation, phonetic implementation, and questions of grammatical correctness or legibility. In other words, the conversation stays within the boundaries of language systems.

Yet language is not only linguistic—it is also visual. Typography, layout, and the form of letters themselves shape how meaning is conveyed. Visual design is not just a neutral carrier of content, but a cultural and rhetorical medium in its own right. As Philipp Stamm already noted in the 1990s, writing and type are not merely tools of communication, but visual languages that shape perception and identity.[52] In this sense it can support, underline, question, or subvert what is being said. It has the potential to irritate conventions, open up space, and suggest alternatives—especially where language reaches its limits.

To move the conversation forward, design practitioners, type designers, educators, and authors need to be part of it. Treating the visual aspects of writing—letters, symbols, typefaces—not as fixed standards but as elements open to reinterpretation allows new spaces for expression to emerge, turning the visual surface of a text into a space for negotiation.

Internationally, this change is already taking place. Designers and theorists are exploring how gender is embedded in typographic norms, and how design might reveal, disrupt, or reimagine those norms.[53] In Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, such approaches remain rare—but elsewhere, visual strategies are being developed that rethink gender not only through words, but through form, color, and rhythm. How typography might allow for nuance, ambiguity, or rupture—without relying on predefined categories. And how the act of looking can become part of the act of understanding.

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[52] Stamm, P. (1997).

[53] Circlude, C. (2023).

TYPOGRAPHY AS A MEDIUM: INTERESTING EXISTING SOLUTIONS

This chapter presents examples of such visual research mentioned before. They show how type design can serve as a tool for reflection and transformation, offering not just formal alternatives, but new ways of thinking about language, identity, and inclusion. What stands out is how differently these design projects approach the topic of gender and inclusive language. The selection presented here was made by me, and it includes projects from various linguistic contexts—regardless of which language they were originally created for.

The Project of Type designer Marie Boulanger critiques the French grammar rule *Le masculin l'emporte* (the masculine prevails). In this principle the masculine form dominates in mixed groups over the feminine form. In her publication *XX, XY: Sex, Letters and Stereotypes*[54], she explores the connections between type design and gender representations. Her focus is less on developing gender-neutral symbols but more on examining the subtle, often unconscious associations embedded in existing type systems. Her central statement: letterforms are not neutral—they're culturally coded and visually charged with gendered stereotypes. Boulanger therefore calls for a critical reflection on the design and effect of type: Which forms are seen as *strong*, *soft*, *technical*, or *emotional*, and how do we link these aesthetic judgments with ideas of masculinity or femininity? She advocates for a shift in how we engage with typographic standards—towards a design practice that consciously positions itself beyond binary categories[55]. Typography becomes a mirror of social structures and a medium capable of questioning and unsettling them.
I see her study as an important analysis of the current situation in font development, where women are still significantly underrepresented and appear more often as name givers than as actual authors. With her analysis, she offers an important and critical perspective on the industry. (Fig. 4)

The hypothetical alphabet *Inform* created by Zach Bokhour, engages with ideas of change and diversity. Bokhour analyzes typefaces based on their appearance and perceived effect, comparing them with cultural and social expectations on making gender stereotypes visible in the process. In his research, a particularly striking

[54] Boulanger, M. (2019).
[55] Green, J. (2022).

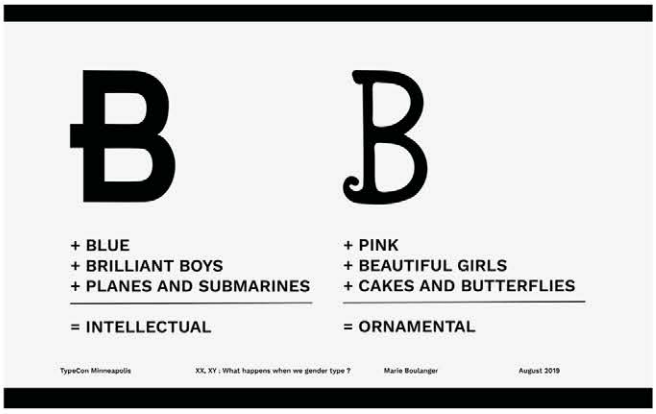

Fig. 4: Example from Marie Boulanger's analysis of gendered typography.

example is the branding of Gillette razor products, which rely heavily on gender clichés[56]. To question and disrupt these visual codes, Zach Bokhour assembled a typeface from existing fonts—one that shifts from a dominant, masculine-looking *A* to a curving, feminine-looking *Z,* pointing out the strong contrast between our socially defined ideals. "In doing so, the stark contrast between our socially defined ideals of masculinity and femininity is highlighted, and a disjuncture is created when the letters are made to work together to form words or sentences."[57] This clash reveals the cultural coding embedded in typography. And the collision of different letter styles causes a moment of visual friction. What I find particularly interesting is that the typeface itself becomes a form of typographic critique and an invitation to rethink typographical forms, order, and visibility. (Fig. 5)

The typeface *Bumpy* developed by Beatrice Caciotti[58] emerged from a similar context but takes the idea of gender stereotypes further. It is a variable font that explicitly resists binary coding and reflects social diversity through typography. The project, questions the deeply rooted gender stereotypes embedded in typographic design by historical development of attributions in advertising and type. Especially the work of William Morris, who rejected modern, ornamental letterforms as *feminine and weak*, advocating instead for a return to *masculine, heavy* types rooted in medieval aesthetics.[59] These value judgments show how deeply cultural ideas about gender have shaped the design of letterforms. *Bumpy* interpolates between two poles: *Rigid*, a sharp, geometric form standing for conformity, and *Fluid*, a flowing, unconventional form that signals individuality. The forms in between become a typographic expression of diverse human identities and experiences. (Fig. 6)

While Caciotti's approach reveals how typography reflects social structures and can act as a tool for visual transformation, Kris Sowersby from Klim Type Foundry takes a slightly different path with Epicene Typeface. It challenges traditional gendered associations not by rejecting them entirely, but by unsettling their foundations. (Fig. 7.) Drawing from historical models often labeled as *masculine* (strong, sharp) or *feminine* (refined, decorative), Epicene was developed to exist out-

[56] Bhandari, M. (2020).
[57] Bokhour, Z. (2016, p. 22).
[58] Ibrahim, A. (2021).
[59] Morris, W. (1982).

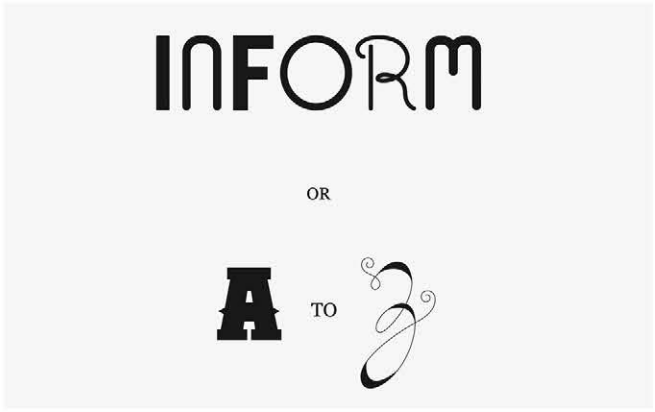

Fig. 5: Visualisation of the hypothetical alphabet *Inform* by Zach Bokhour

Fig. 6: Specimen of the typeface Bumpy by Beatrice Caciotti.

Fig. 7: Specimen of the typeface Epicene by Klim Type Foundry.

side this binary.[60] [61] Sowersby questions the idea that type can truly be gender-neutral, acknowledging that perceptions of gender in typography are culturally loaded. Rather than claiming to erase gender, the font plays with these associations, soft curves meet strong structure, creating a form that resists easy classification. The result is a beautiful Baroque Old Style typeface that reflects back our own assumptions and projections about gendered forms. But because it follows such a classic and subtle approach, I wonder whether it will actually be read as a solution beyond the existing gender binary.

There are also experimental interventions in existing fonts, such as Sarah Gephart's gender-neutral ligature, that shows the potential of typographic design as a space of resistance, which I find particularly interesting. In 2018, Sarah Gephart[62] developed a gender-neutral glyph that is now included as a ligature in the Source Sans 3 typeface. The font is free to use and available on Google Fonts. This solution was developed specifically for English, so it doesn't apply to other languages. The idea was that the font would automatically insert a neutral symbol whenever a gendered pronoun is typed. Her speculative design project was a direct response to an *iOS-emoji* suggestion that automatically offered a white, male emoji for the word *CEO.* In reaction, she designed a gender-neutral typographic character intended as an alternative to *he* or *she.* Gephart doesn't see her new symbol as a finished solution but rather as a signal that typographic systems are adaptable—and that meaning is something shaped through use. She describes her project as "positiv radicalism"[63], a form of gentle, design-based activism. It's about critically questioning how typography represents gender and imagining what other options could exist. The idea that a small symbol can be part of a larger cultural shift—if it is noticed, adopted, and further developed—is central to her approach. (Fig. 8a, 8b)

I find this idea interesting because it is introducing a new form as a glyph, which will automatically display while typing. The advantage of using symbolic placeholders for pronouns or non-binary endings lies in their openness: they can be filled with personal meaning and used in unusual ways. The downside is that their pronunciation remains unclear.

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[60] Kellerman, L. (2021).

[61] Sowersby, K. (2021).

[62] Gephart, S. (2025).

[63] Riechers, A. (2018).

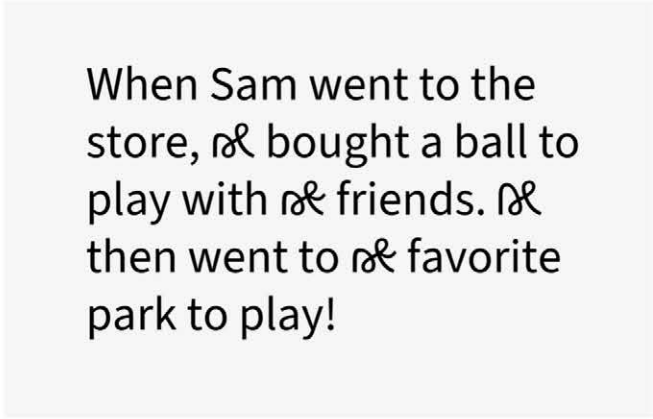

Fig. 8a: Example of Sarah Gephart's non-binary glyphs in Source Sans Pro

Fig. 8b: Screenshot from a personal test using the typeface, examining whether occurrences o *'she'* or *'he'* within names are correctly excluded from replacement.

Researching ways to shape Typography in new and unconventional ways, I also encountered approaches about queering type—another key aspect when talking about unconventional or expanded uses of type. Paul Soulellis describes queering typography as a kind of searching and questioning, often contradictory. It moves along the edges of what is considered professional, correct, or valid. Instead of striving for clarity or perfection, it highlights breaks and gaps. It subverts rules that are usually taken for granted—such as the idea of "legibility" or "typographic authority".[64] What happens when typography doesn't function as expected? When it interrupts, shifts, or even resists? Queer typography makes space for these moments—not as decorative effect, but as a conscious stance. This approach is interesting because it doesn't rely on established systems or fixed outcomes. Instead, it opens up visual and conceptual space for the unspoken, the overlooked, and the not-yet-visible. What I found especially inspiring about the approach to queering typography is that it doesn't aim to be pleasing, as it's not just about visual style but a political gesture. (Fig. 9)

For the French language, the collective Bye Bye Binary has been exploring alternative ways of representing non-binary glyphs for nearly a decade in a politically engaged, radical, and playful way[65]. The French–Belgian collective was founded in 2018 in Brussels, following a joint workshop by the type design departments at *École de Recherche Graphique (ERG)* and *La Cambre*. It brings together designers, typographers, and artists with the aim of developing new graphic and typographic forms—especially ones suited to the French language.[66] The collective's main focus is the development of post-binary glyphs, including letters, ligatures, connecting or symbiotic elements. These are intended to visually support inclusive and non-binary language and to open up new modes of linguistic expression. (Fig. 10) A central project of the group is the Typothèque Bye Bye Binary, an open font library dedicated exclusively to inclusive and non-binary typefaces (e.g. BBB Baskervol, DINDong, and others)[67] This library functions as both an experimental playground and a research platform for new typographic approaches. In addition to developing typefaces, Bye Bye Binary is also actively engaged in education and community-based projects. The work of the collective demonstrates how typography can function as

[64] Soulellis, P. (2021).

[65] Contributeurs aux projets Wikimedia. (2025)

[66] Bye Bye Binary (2023).

[67] Typotheque Genderfluid Project (n.d.).

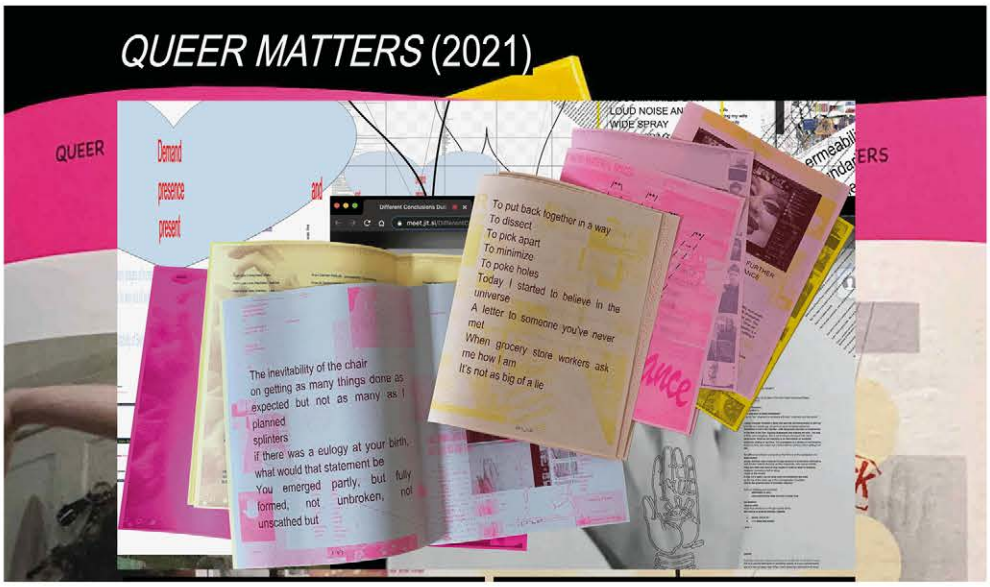

Fig. 9: Paul Soulellis, *Queer Archive Work* with a selection of queer zines and self-published materials.

Fig. 10: Landing page featuring non-binary glyph examples from the collective Bye Bye Binary.

an active tool for fostering inclusion and challenging binary norms. With their Open Source attitude and by combining design, community practice, and research, the collective invests in exchange and helps to create new spaces for language and identity. I was genuinely excited to see how their projects combine collaborative work, knowledge-sharing, and even include a type foundry. It made me hopeful to find similar approaches within the German-speaking design world—but I din't.

Of course, there are interesting projects. One example is the master's thesis *www.einexanderexwelt.xyz* by Carla Crameri[68] (ZHDK 2019), which approaches written non-binary language from a poetic perspective (Fig. 11). Or the publication *Typohacks* by Hannah Witte[69], which explores different strategies for gender marking in German. The book presents ways to repurpose existing characters as connective elements and offering a range of alternatives to colons or underscores. However, the book focuses primarily on using existing glyphs, investigating reading flow, and developing solutions for new gender markers (Fig. 12). Witte later also launched the website *www.flintype.com*, featuring a broad collection of typefaces designed by FLINTA* individuals. Yet when I browsed through the site, I found that only two of the available fonts actually included non-binary glyphs—and both of them originated from ByeByeBinary.

After searching for quite some time—without finding any concrete examples of implemented non-binary glyphs or inclusive typefaces for German—I came across a young design studio from Bern that's contributing new perspectives to the field. *Studio ¡muchogusto!*[70] has recently developed several type-based solutions for non-binary forms of expression. Drawing inspiration from commission work for feminist readings or LGBTIQ+ parties, the studio explores how typographic design can contribute to the visibility of gender diversity and showcased at the *Type Talks podium of Berner Design Stiftung*[71]. Through the creation of fonts that support non-binary expression, Olivia Hubli and Patrizia Bürkli experiment with new ways of making communication more inclusive and diverse—playful, not pretending to be complete, but guided by a clear political awareness and a sharp sensitivity to power structures, marginalization, and minority perspectives. (Fig. 13)

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[68] Crameri, C. (2019).

[69] Witte, H. (2021).

[70] Studio Mucho Gusto. (n.d.).

[71] Berner Fachhochschule. (2025).

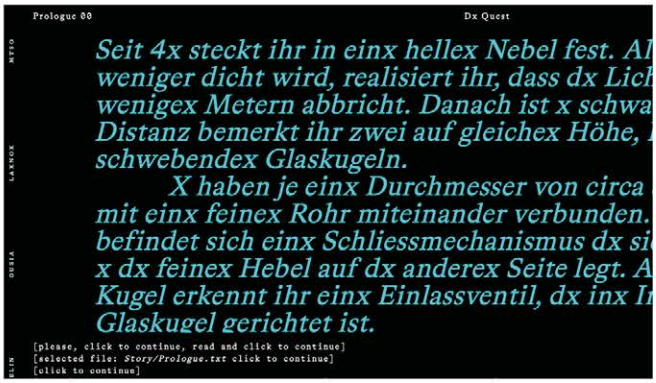

Fig. 11: Example from Carla Crameri's website showing the replacement of word endings with the letterr *'x'*.

Fig. 12: Double-page spread from Hannah Witte's book, showing systematic tests, with alternative gender markers.

Fig. 13: Landing page with selections of typefaces featuring inclusive elements by Studio ¡muchogusto!.

I contacted *Studio ¡muchogusto!* and met with them in Biel and Bern to exchange ideas and discuss possible contributions to this shared topic. These conversations were not only inspiring, but also pointed toward the urgency of building a stronger network of designers who are committed to inclusion and visibility. For inclusive language to become genuinely accessible and functional, broader collaboration is essential—across disciplines, generations, and design cultures. This need for collective engagement becomes particularly evident when looking at current approaches to non-binary type design. The following chapter examines their potential, as well as critical perspectives on their limitations.

NON-BINARY TYPE DESIGN: POTENTIAL AND CRITIQUE

An important step in my research was the exchange with Loraine Furter, a member of the collective ByeByeBinary. It was highly insightful to gain a deeper understanding of their conceptual approach and technical solutions. The glyph system developed by ByeByeBinary is built around a *visual marker*. Specifically, the middle dot, which functions as a trigger for interaction. When users type a middle dot before a non-binary form, such as *Student•in*, the following glyph is automatically replaced by the corresponding ligature. If the word is copied and pasted into a regular font that doesn't support these ligatures, the middle dot remains visible—continuing to signal the inclusive form clearly. (Fig. 14)

I find this approach particularly interesting because, in my own tests, glyph systems that respond to markers like asterisks or dots worked reliably across different layouts—whether print, PDF, or web. If these forms eventually become compatible with screen readers or other automated tools, they could offer a more accessible option for inclusive language. And if, in the future, designers of inclusive typefaces begin referencing the same Unicode values, it would be possible to build a shared foundation and influence how these glyphs behave within text.

Randomized reactions in text through added elements like stars, swashes, distorted letters, or other symbols—as explored by studios like *Studio ¡muchogusto!* or *Velvetyne*—are as well interesting strategies. They disrupt the usual reading flow and gently challenge how we're used to seeing and interpreting written language.

In my own experiments, I tried to take this idea further by combining it with variable fonts. With this approach, the level of irritation or disruption can be adjusted—allowing different moods or visual frictions to emerge more easily and be played with more consciously.

These design approaches are not without controversy. While some voices in the debate call for new letters and symbols, others reject the idea of reducing linguistic diversity to a specific ligature or a single universal sign, out of concern that this might once again channel complexity into a standardized system[72]. Designer Viktor Freeling voiced in *Eye on Design* his unease that if his pronouns were reduced down to just a single symbol he wouldn't feel comfortable[73].

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[72] Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. (2023).

[73] Kask, B. (2019).

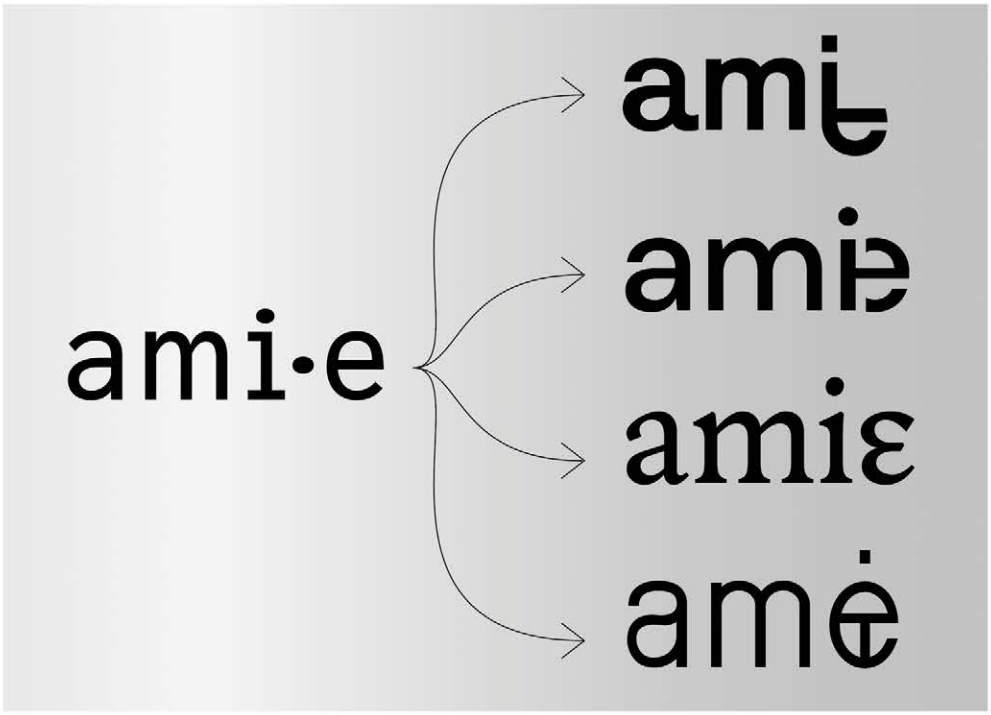


Fig. 14: Explanation by the collective Bye Bye Binary on how visual markers are used to trigger ligatures.

Another example of this ongoing tension is the response to Bye Bye Binary's efforts to establish non-binary expressions officially within the French language. The *Académie française* (the official authority on the French language) has repeatedly criticized such initiatives. As early as 2017, it described gender-inclusive writing as a "mortal danger"[74] to the French language. In 2023, the French Senate even called for a ban on gender-inclusive language in official documents. Because of that, none of these proposals for french language have been officially adopted so far, but they have nonetheless drawn public attention to the concerns of non-binary language users. This shows that it's important to make room for variation and to invite open debate—both for and against specific forms, in visual and typographic contexts as well as in broader social discourse.

I assume that a possible reason why discussions about designed non-binary glyphs and typographic symbols have not gained the same attention in the German-speaking comunitiy may be rooted in the fact that existing solutions using special characters or non-binary formulations already offer a workable compromise.

The strength of the examples mentioned above and in the previous chapter lies in their diversity: some are contradictory, fragmented, and loud. Others follow quiet strategies and careful visualizations. They open up traditional spaces, shift established perspectives, and invite us to take a closer look—to rethink what we've come to accept as standard notions of legibility and representation.

The intention here is not to arrive at one definitive answer but to experiment with new ways of expressing language, visibility, and connection. Spaces in which different stories can be told. Spaces where it's possible to write differently—and to be perceived differently.

It's obvious that these interventions can't be created and sustained by one single person. That's why the next two sections of this work are dedicated to another crucial aspect of engaging with new and non-binary language practices: on the one hand, the technical requirements needed to develop truly inclusive type design and ensure readability; on the other, the importance of collective work, exchange, and co-authorship.

[74] Samuel, H. (2017).

TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS

From a technical point of view, every letter and symbol in a typeface is assigned to a Unicode, a globally valid number that ensures the glyph is correctly identified and displayed across all writing systems and fonts. In its current version (11.0.0), the Unicode Standard encodes exactly 137,374 typographic characters[75].

For French, the collective ByeByeBinary has already proposed and documented a first unified list of non-binary glyphs[76] [77], including ligature systems based on markers like the middle dot (Fig. 15). These are technically structured to trigger OpenType features and produce alternative glyphs in specific contexts.

However, for German, there are no clearly defined or widely shared Unicode assignments for non-binary glyphs. If we want newly designed non-binary characters to be recognised, shared, and processed reliably in digital systems, proper Unicode attribution will become increasingly important.

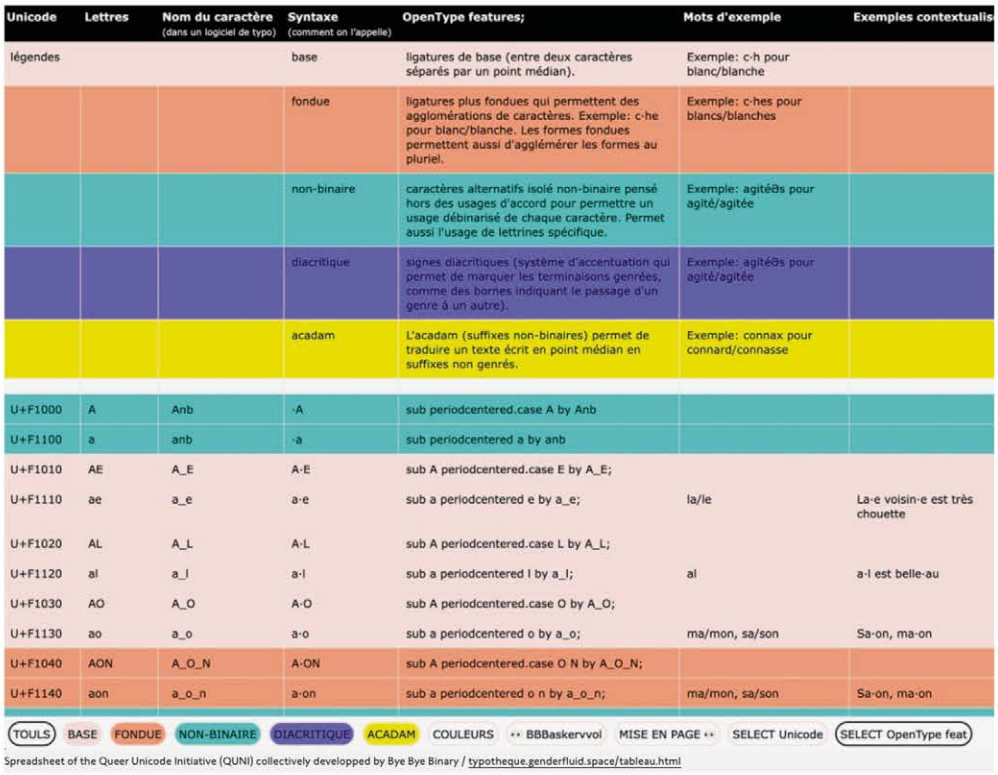
Because Unicode is managed by an open consortium, even smaller innovations can be submitted and incorporated—if they are created by clear technical proposals and a strong enough initiative. If, for example, non-binary glyphs were designed and officially assigned to specific Unicode numbers—comparable to the “œ” in French or the “ß” in German—they could be integrated into typefaces as alternates, and used to automatically replace defined character sequences with inclusive signs. Such glyphs could then become not just visual elements, but functional components in writing systems—available, readable, and interpretable across media and platforms. (Fig. 16)

Even if nonbinary glyphs would be displayed correctly across different platforms, there is still the concern that gender-inclusive language creates barriers for people with disabilities. That the effort to include all genders might unintentionally exclude people with certain disabilities That’s exactly why thoughtful, diverse solutions—and a conversation that stays open, accessible, and collective—are important. For instance, by considering the needs of people with reading disabilities. In my project, I haven’t reached that point yet, but I found helpful information from

[75] decodeunicode. (n.d.).

[76] Bye Bye Binary. (n.d.).

[77] ANRT. (n.d.).



Unicode	Lettres	Nom du caractère (dans un logiciel de typo)	Syntaxe (comment on l'appelle)	OpenType features;	Mots d'exemple	Exemples contextualis
légendes			base	ligatures de base (entre deux caractères séparés par un point médian).	Exemple: c·h pour blanc/blanche	
			fondue	ligatures plus fondues qui permettent des agglomérations de caractères. Exemple: c·he pour blanc/blanche. Les formes fondues permettent aussi d'agglémérer les formes au pluriel.	Exemple: c·hes pour blancs/blanches	
			non-binaire	caractères alternatifs isolé non-binaire pensé hors des usages d'accord pour permettre un usage débinarisé de chaque caractère. Permet aussi l'usage de lettrines spécifique.	Exemple: agitéθs pour agité/agitée	
			diacritique	signes diacritiques (système d'accentuation qui permet de marquer les terminaisons genrées, comme des bornes indiquant le passage d'un genre à un autre).	Exemple: agitéθs pour agité/agitée	
			acadam	L'acadam (suffixes non-binaires) permet de traduire un texte écrit en point médian en suffixes non genrés.	Exemple: connax pour connard/connasse	
U+F1000	A	Anb	·A	sub periodcentered.case A by Anb		
U+F1100	a	anb	·a	sub periodcentered a by anb		
U+F1010	AE	A_E	A·E	sub A periodcentered.case E by A_E;		
U+F1110	ae	a_e	a·e	sub a periodcentered e by a_e;	la/le	La·e voisin·e est très chouette
U+F1020	AL	A_L	A·L	sub A periodcentered.case L by A_L;		
U+F1120	al	a_l	a·l	sub a periodcentered l by a_l;	al	a·l est belle·au
U+F1030	AO	A_O	A·O	sub A periodcentered.case O by A_O;		
U+F1130	ao	a_o	a·o	sub a periodcentered o by a_o;	ma/mon, sa/son	Sa·on, ma·on
U+F1040	AON	A_O_N	A·ON	sub A periodcentered.case O N by A_O_N;		
U+F1140	aon	a_o_n	a·on	sub a periodcentered o n by a_o_n;	ma/mon, sa/son	Sa·on, ma·on

TOULS BASE FONDUE NON-BINAIRE DIACRITIQUE ACADAM COULEURS •• BBBaskervvol MISE EN PAGE •• SELECT Unicode SELECT OpenType feat

Spreadsheet of the Queer Unicode Initiative (QUNI) collectively developped by Bye Bye Binary / typotheque.genderfluid.space/tableau.html

Fig. 15: Systematic overview of characters and OpenType features used to establish unified alternative glyphs (in French).

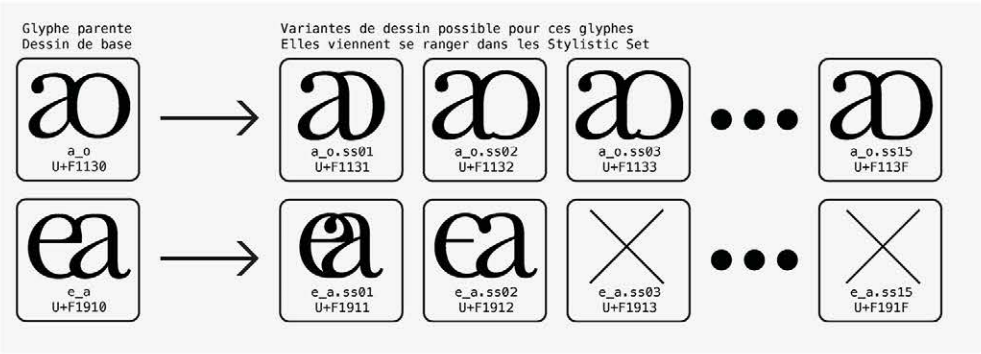


Fig. 16: Detailed explanation of the OpenType features assigned to alternate glyphs.

the organization *Zugang für alle*[78] *(Access for All)*, a foundation for accessible technology use. Which explains that technical solutions for inclusive signs are possible. *Access for All* mentions that the consistency within a given text is more important than which inclusive form is used. This is important for screen readers to be able to follow a defined rule. Because different needs often contradict each other, there is no universal solution at this point yet. But gender-neutral wording—like *Kundschaft* instead of *Kund*innen* or *Studierende* instead of *Student:innen*—is recommended wherever possible. When gender-neutral alternatives aren't an option, the organization recommends the use of the colon—Student:innen—as it also includes non-binary individuals and works well with screen readers. Depending on user settings, the colon can be read out loud or simply marked by a short pause. It is visually light and doesn't disrupt the reading flow too much.

However, the deeper conflict of needs remains. Gender-inclusive forms aim to make non-binary identities visible—but some versions, especially those using special characters, can create barriers for people with visual or cognitive challenges. Screen readers might mispronounce them, and the sentence structure can become harder to follow. (Fig. 17)

In the long term, it seems clear that the goal must be to integrate social, political, visual, and technical needs. Ideally, users themselves could actively contribute to finding solutions. Since there are currently few defined standards, this opens up space for open-ended development and collective experimentation.

[78] Access for All. (2023.).

	A1	A2	B1
Stern Mitarbeiter*innen			
Doppelpunkt Mitarbeiter:innen			
Neutral mit „ende" Mitarbeitende			
Neutral Team, Personal			
2 Geschlechter Mitarbeiter und Mitarbeiterinnen			

Grün bedeutet: Die Prüfgruppen verstehen den Text und die Form schließt alle Menschen ein. Man kann sie immer verwenden.

Gelb bedeutet: Mit einer Erklärung ist die Form verständlich und die Menschen lernen, dass es mehr als 2 Geschlechter gibt. Sie kann verwendet werden.
Wenn man 2 Geschlechter nennt, schließt man nicht alle Menschen ein. Aber das ist trotzdem besser, als wenn man nur die männliche Form verwendet.

Rot bedeutet: Die Form ist schwer verständlich oder schließt nicht alle Menschen ein. Sie soll nicht verwendet werden.

Fig. 17: Recommendation for gender-inclusive formulations for disabled people, suggested by Access for All.

COLLECTIVE THINKING

The development of gender-inclusive language is not a linear movement but one that takes shape at the intersection of language, society, and design. Up to now, only very few binding rules have been formulated or consistently followed—both on the linguistic and on the visual level. And yet, precisely these gaps open up both a design and societal potential: they are open fields, ready to be addressed, questioned, and played with. In Belgium and France, for example, this discourse is already much more advanced—not least because of the work of the collective Bye Bye Binary, which meets regularly, organizes workshops, and actively develops non-binary glyphs for French-language writing systems.

What is particularly interesting is that this movement is shaped by openness, tolerance, and the desire for visibility and exchange. The approach is collaborative and intentionally non-elitist. It's about sharing knowledge in a conceptual as well as in a practical way. A beautiful example is the CUTE License[79] (*Conditions d'Utilisations Typographiques Engageantes*) (Fig. 18) developed by the collective *Bye Bye Binary*, which is based on openness and a principle of solidarity. The typefaces they create are open source, accessible via GitHub, and can be downloaded, modified, extended, and re-shared freely.

There are also other type collectives like *Alphabettes*[80], *Futuress*[81], or *Créatrices*[82], which foster exchange and share knowledge—not just about typography, but also about political questions, queer theory, empowerment, and solidarity. Most of them work collectively, with workshops or online lectures, and are eager to connect with other designers and educators. Many of these initiatives started small, with individual actions that slowly grew into visual expressions, activist experiments, and joyful design work. Through mutual support and collective making, these traces became something shared: a collaborative outcome shaped by many voices.

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[79] Bye Bye Binary. (2024).

[80] *Alphabettes is an international network and platform that promotes the work of women and non-binary people in type, typography, and the lettering arts. Founded in 2015, it serves as a collective space for critical discussion, research, publishing, and visibility within the traditionally male-dominated fields of type design and typographic culture.*

[81] *Futuress is a digital and community-based platform at the intersection of design, politics, and feminism. Founded in 2020, it provides space for underrepresented voices—especially women and queer designers—through publishing, research, lectures, and workshops. It focuses on design justice, critical pedagogy, and intersectional feminist perspectives within visual culture.*

[82] *Créatrices.ch is a Swiss digital archive and platform that documents and promotes the work of women, trans, and non-binary creators in design, art, architecture, and other creative fields. The initiative is based in Switzerland and aims to make the contributions of historically marginalized creators visible and accessible. It functions both as a research tooland a feminist curatorial project, working toward greater gender equity in the cultural sector.*

Fig. 18: Cover page of The CUTE Licence by Bye Bye Binary, a set of principles for inclusive, community-driven type design. It encourages open, responsible sharing and use of typographic tools that challenge binary gender norms.

This participatory approach was something that I actively integrated into the process of my own work. That's why I initiated a survey and a workshop and engaged in exchange with various people active in the field, like for instance, Eva Weinmayr (HGK Basel), whose artistic-research practice focuses on feminist-intersectional discourses around collective knowledge production and my fellow Student Jules Hoogkamper, who was researching on a similar topic. Equally inspiring were the conversations with the type designers and graphic designers from *Studio ¡mucho-gusto!* (Bern), Fanny Geiser (Biel), Stefanie Preis (Zurich) and Luzi Gantenbein (Bern). These exchanges clearly showed a strong interest in collaborative formats and non-hierarchical work structures.

In conversation with Loraine Furter (Brussels), I also realized that beyond creating new type designs, there's a strong motivation to actively question and reshape existing coding systems and market structures. One topic that came up was the idea of envisioning a different kind of economy—not only in terms of money, but also in how we deal with type, administration, and access. What does it mean to design and share resources in ways that are open and free, rather than closed and expensive? This way of thinking is closely tied to the general approach behind Bye Bye Binary's work, which is led by openness, connection, and open-source systems.

Loraine Furter strongly encourages sharing unfinished work. Letting others see projects that are still in progress, still soft, still in the making. This openness breaks with elitist expectations and hierarchies—something that feels especially important when it comes to inclusive language and design. Neither the process nor the outcome claims to offer a solution that works for everyone. It's more about exploring and offering possibilities, suggesting directions, testing ideas, and letting things remain open.

And there is no single, unified way to work with inclusive language. Also because each language brings its own specific challenges. The whole movement has many layers. It touches on visibility, activism, decolonization, and critiques of patriarchy—all in a playful and often disruptive way. The strength lies in choosing to work collectively, to share responsibility and authorship, and to open up space for new forms of visual language and communication. Different strategies are needed to keep this process alive—to make space for hybrid, nuanced positions on different levels and in different contexts.

My exchange with Loraine confirmed what I already sensed: this kind of work can't be done alone. It relies on the input and contributions of many. And she's op-

timistic that this movement is now also beginning to take shape in the German-speaking world—and curious to see how we'll contribute to the ongoing dialogue.

What stands out is that gender-inclusive questions are still barely visible in the field of typography. There are hardly any standardized practices, and many designers are currently working in isolation on individual solutions. Yet it would be urgently necessary to connect these processes more strongly and define concrete modes of action—technically and in terms of design.

The typographic interventions that are already emerging are often embedded in larger feminist movements or actions—such as the *Feministischer Streik*, feminist readings, or events for FLINTA individuals. These examples are still operating outside of the mainstream, but they show quite clearly that the topic is also about social responsibility and a broader shift in awareness. Inclusive language and gender-inclusive design can serve as tools in that process, and ideally becoming activist statements and signals for change. I see my thesis as part of such a continuous process.

Visual Experiments and Practical Tests

In this section, I document a selection of examples from my visual research and own experiments. It's important to me that these experiments are not seen as final or definitive solutions, but rather as starting points—as ideas and interventions that operate on different levels. We operate in an experimental, open, and dynamic space when creating gender-inclusive signs, as noted in the first part. A space where many things can (and should) be tried out.

That's why it was important for me to test and explore a wide range of approaches. Each experiment is critically reflected upon, contextualized within its application environment, and if relevant, complemented by comparable design solutions from other practitioners.

EXPERIMENTS WITH TYPOGRAPHY

a. Highlighting Words

I investigated the statement by Luise F. Pusch that German is a male language, by carefully analyzing and highlighting examples from a specialized books on design and communications of Frank Berzbach[83], which I thought would be already carefully edited to avoid gender biases in language. Interestingly, while nouns and pronouns were sometimes gendered, it was striking that all texts still contained many expressions clearly written from a male perspective. Examples like *Ja-Sager-Effekt* or *Herr der Lage* stood out. This shows that gender bias is not only embedded in perspective or grammatical structure, but also deeply rooted in the meanings of words themselves. To change them we have no other possibility than to replace the words with other expressions, which I did systematically in this example. (Fig. a. 1–2)

b. Replacing Words

In the German language, many words contain the component *mann*, and the generic expression *man* is also used very frequently e.g. *Man sollte immer höflich sein* (One should always be polite). To counterbalance this predominance, the word part *mann* is replaced with a symbol. (Fig. b. 1) This can be done using an existing but relatively unknown glyph within the typeface in use. After encountering a few instances, readers will be able to recognize the symbol and automatically substitute it with the word *mann* while reading. In this way, the visual overrepresentation of the word *mann* is reduced. It leaves space to interpret the position with the gender the reader likes. At the same time, this playful intervention in the text creates a kind of rupture. Terms that often appear very serious lose some of their rigidity, a space opens up in which meanings can be reassigned and reinterpreted. This seems particularly important when it comes to professional titles and functions, as it offers a way to challenge rigid role models like *Feuerwehrmann*, *Bauherrschaft*, where the word *herr* as been replaced. (Fig. b. 2)

[83] Berzbach, F. (2010, p. 69).

Nein zu sagen, wenn man Nein sagen sollte, bringt Vorteile, und es ist erlernbar. Zum einen nehmen einen die Kollegen ernster, weil erst mit dem Zeigen von Grenzen die Konturen einer Persönlichkeit sichtbar werden. Dem steht ein psychologisches Phänomen entgegen: der so genannte Ja-Sager-Effekt, Menschen stimmen lieber zu. (Gute Verkäufer machen sich diese Tricks zu eigen.)
Wer Nein sagen kann, der ist ehrlich. Der Vorteil des wohldosierten Nein liegt auf der Hand: Sie bleiben Herr der Lage, werden selbstbewusster und somit respektvoller behandelt.

Fig. a. 1: Highlighting words: Example of the original text in which male-oriented expressions were marked as problematic.

Nein zu sagen, wenn wir Nein sagen sollten, bringt Vorteile, und es ist erlernbar. Zum einen nehmen einen die Kolleg*innen ernster, weil erst mit dem Zeigen von Grenzen die Konturen einer Persönlichkeit sichtbar werden. Dem steht ein psychologisches Phänomen entgegen: der so genannte Beflichtigungs–effekt, Menschen stimmen lieber zu. (Gute Verkäufer*innen machen sich diese Tricks zu eigen.)
Personen, die Nein sagen können, sind ehrlich. Der Vorteil des wohldosierten Nein liegt auf der Hand: Sie bleiben in Kontrolle, werden selbstbewusster und somit respektvoller behandelt.

Fig. a. 2: Highlighting words: The same text, but male-oriented expressions were replaced using textual alternatives for nouns (blue), fixed expressions (pink), and pronouns (green).

Amt»
Berg»
Briefträger
Dienst»
Ehe»
Ersatz»
Fach»
Feuerwehr»
Frauenfussball»schaft
Fuhr»
Geschäfts»

Fig. b. 1: Replacing words: substitution of the word *Mann* with an existing glyph [U+21A3] from the typeface Suisse BP Int'l Light

Bau
Bau schaft
Dienst
Eigentümer rschaft
Forst
Grund
Guts
Haus
scher
Kauf
Lehns

Fig. b. 2: Replacing Words: substitution of the word *Herr* with an existing Arabic glyph [U+0601].

c. Replacing Letters with Signs

Instead of inserting a typographic marker between the stem and the ending, (as it is common with the asterisk or other signs,) another approach was chosen. I replaced the letter '*i*' in *innen* with a symbol or existing glyph. This typographic intervention turns the form itself into a layer of meaning. In the first example, set in *xx Liberte*[84], the star symbol adds a moment of sparkle and suggests diversity. In the second, using *Inclusive*[85], the plus sign opens the form up to symbolically including everyone who might not be explicitly named. In the third version, set in *BBB Baskervvol*[86], a flower-like symbol takes the place of the '*i*', evoking care, gentleness, and a warmer notion of inclusion. And the forth one, set in *Resistance*[87] is in a way censoring the '*i*' and gives at the same time extra attention to the situation. Even though in all examples the letter is technically missing, the word remains easy to read. Our eyes and minds fill the gap almost automatically. It plays with a small interruption that invites us to see differently what language can be and how a visual form might help to express it. (Fig. c. 1)

d. Replacing Letters with Ligatures

Early on in this project, I started thinking about whether a ligature effect could be used to support gender-inclusive language. (Fig. d. 1–4) I began experimenting with how such a connection might be expressed visually, specifically by combining the last two letters of the stem of a word. In the example shown here, it's the combination *'er'*, as in *Grafik•er•innen*. The sketches explore different connection heights and formal variations, from open structures to more fluid transitions. It was less about finding a finished form and more about testing out visual relationships. I returned to this idea later in a more systematic way.(see also experiment x. page xx).

[84] Studio Mucho Gusto, Typefoundry. (n.d.).

[85] King, O., Inclusive Sans. (n.d.).

[86] ByeByeBinary, BBB Baskervvol. (n.d.).

[87] The Velveteam, Resistance (n.d.)

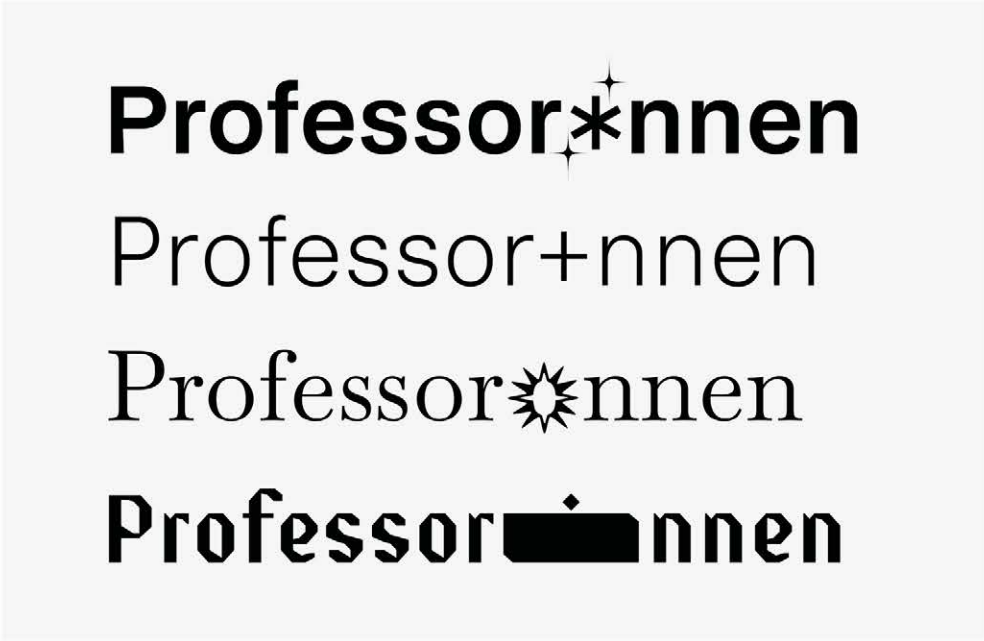

Fig. c. 1: Substitution of the letter 'i' with existing glyphs from the following typefaces (top to bottom): XX Liberté, Inclusive, BBB Baskervvol, Resistance.

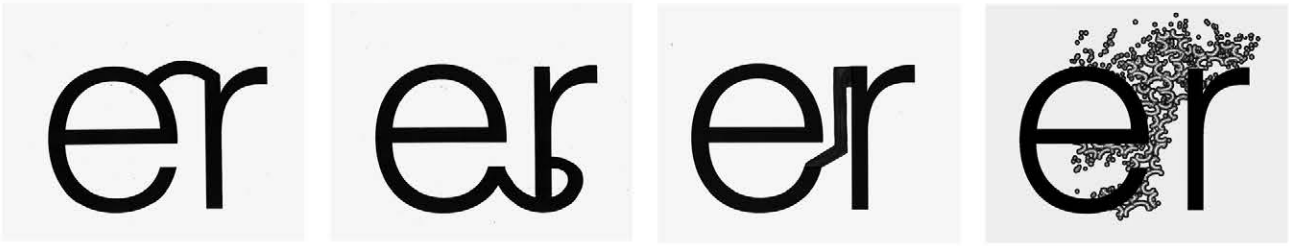

Fig. d. 1–4: Test series exploring the effect of ligatures in varying styles and sizes on legibility.

e. Connecter

Another way to bring more visibility to gender-inclusive forms is by inserting an additional glyph that acts as a connector between letters. In the examples shown here, the glyph is specifically designed to work like a flexible linking element. It takes inspiration from shapes like a heart (Fig. e. 1) or a flowing ribbon (Fig. e. 2), which both visually and conceptually signal connection, care, and inclusion. The form has been carefully drawn to connect with any letter of the open-source font Work Sans by Wei Huang and supports a sense of openness and movement, something that also reflects the fluidity and adaptability of gender-inclusive expression. The connector glyph doesn't have to appear only in the expected place between stem and ending. It can also be inserted elsewhere in the word, even in words that are already inclusive by nature, like *Studierende*. Placed this way, the glyph becomes a visual accent: it draws attention to the presence of all genders and invites the reader to pause, reflect, and perhaps read the word a little differently. It adds a playful layer to language, one that shows inclusion.

f. Adjustable Connector in Variable Fonts

An alternative, though clearly more complex approach, would be to use a variable typeface with a flexible connecting glyph. The idea is inspired by the **innen* ending, as seen in various sticker campaigns. This example is based on a reversed reality and speculates on the idea of using only the feminine grammatical form. The connecting glyph links from the ending back to the word stem. Within the variable font, you can control how visible this connection appears—ranging from subtle to more pronounced. While it works well as a thought experiment, its chances as a practical solution are probably quite limited. Aside from the fact that an exclusively feminine form with a gender star is unlikely to gain broad acceptance, creating a full variable font just for one glyph is relatively time-consuming and not very efficient. Still, the idea might be worth continuing. Especially for use in moving images or animated type, where dynamic forms can unfold their full potential. (Fig. f. 1–4)

Fig. e. 1: Custom heart-shaped glyph element designed by the author, based on the existing typeface and integrated to connect the stem and ending within words.

Fig. e. 2: Custom ribbon-shaped glyph, designed and implemented within the typeface to support greater visual flow in word composition.

Fig. f. 1–4: Adjustable connector in a variable font, illustrating different states of visual connection between characters.

g. Variations in readability

In this example, I was inspired by existing French solutions for gender-inclusive writing like *étudiant-e-s*. Since German nouns are often structured in a comparable way, with a root word followed by a masculine and then a feminine ending, it felt like a useful approach to try applying this system to German. Following the same logic, I added a complementary gender-neutral ending, in this case *-ens*, as proposed by Lann Hornscheidt[88]. To guarantee readability, the different parts of the words are separated with a tiny middle point. It's a minor intervention, but it makes a big difference as it creates rhythm and gives visual structure. What I particularly like about this option is that it allows readers to choose how they want to engage with the word. It doesn't dictate one correct reading but leaves space for interpretation. As long as we're talking about the singular form without pronouns, this seems like a practical and elegant solution. The plural form, especially when it comes to the endings, should be trickier, and that part still needs more exploring. Of course we could also think about creating new markers with additional meaning instead of the middle point between the parts of the word. Which leads me to the next experiment, where markers are implemented as an additional element. (Fig. g. 1)

h. Supplementary markers

This experiment reduces the noun to its stem. While linguistically this might seem like a radical step, it opens up space for creative graphic solutions. Instead of fixed endings, each person could choose their own preferred marker—similar to placing three dots at the end of a word. These signs could then stand for the masculine, feminine, or non-binary form. (Fig. h. 1)

i. Visualizing diversity

Another way to express gender identity, even when using a masculine or supposedly neutral form, is through typographic variation. By combining different typefaces or randomly swapping letters via code (Fig. i. 1) diversity can be made visible on the visual level (Fig. i. 2). This system can serve two purposes: either to literally depict diversity by showing a variety of shapes, styles, and characteristics, or as a kind of hack in a way to break uniformity and signal multiplicity even in seemingly "neutral" or binary terms.

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[88] Hornscheidt, L., & Sammla, J. (2021, p. 57).

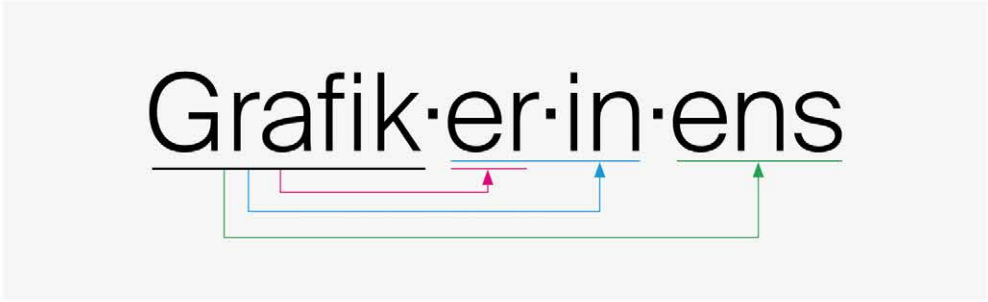

Fig. g. 1: Variations in readability. Different endings are visually separated using middlepoints or hyphens.

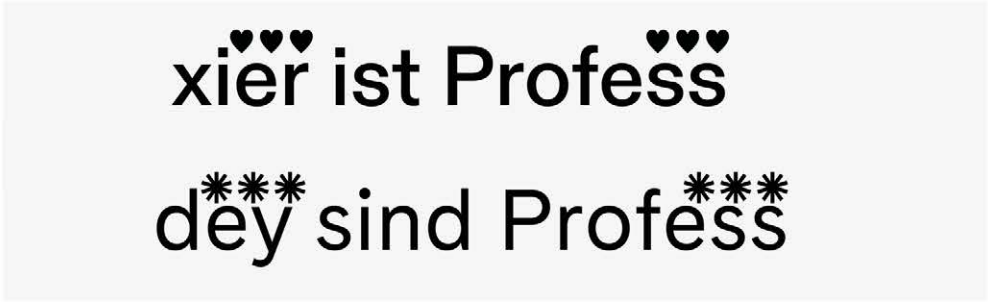

Fig. h. 1: Visual markers such as hearts and asterisks are added above pronouns and word endings to highlight gender identity within the text.

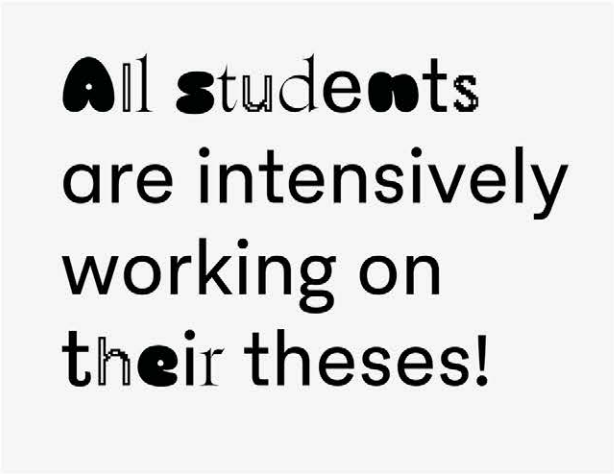

Fig. i. 1: Visualising diversity by combining different typefaces within individual words to reflect variation and individuality.

Fig. i. 2: Visualising diversity through typographic outlines and colour differentiation applied to individual letters within words.

j. Fluidity

This and the following examples take a more stylistic approach to the question of inclusive language. Rather than focusing on strategy, they explore how change and multiplicity can be made visible on a visual level. This first one highlights the fluidity and ongoing transformation within gender-inclusive language. Similar to example g, it concentrates on the connecting letters between word stem and ending, visualizing the in-between through letterforms in motion. The shifting shapes point to the unconventional and often unstable field of non-binary expression.
(Fig. j. 1–5)

k. Glitch

A similar approach can be seen in these glitching examples, where letters start to interlock or distort. The result is a moment of unreadability that interrupts the flow and asks the reader to stop, question, and re-engage. The glitch draws attention to the instability of what's being communicated while also reflecting a political stance: it breaks with the dominance of masculine forms and undermines the illusion of clarity. This disruption, although minimal, offers a radical visual intervention that calls norms into question. (Fig. k. 1–4)

l. Decomposition

In this experiment, I used a tool based on the coding language Hydra to decompose letterforms in a randomized way. The idea was to explore how far distortion could go while still maintaining a connection to language. The visual effect was striking, but I didn't take this direction much further. It felt too abstract and didn't offer the kind of readability or accessibility I was aiming for. (Fig. l. 1–3)

Fig. j. 1–5: Fluidity effect created manually or with Cavalry, used to visualise the instability and ambiguity of non-binary expression.

Fig. k. 1–4: Glitch effect generated with Basil.js, illustrating a disruption of readability that challenges normative expectations of typographic continuity.

Fig. l. 1–3: Decomposition of letterforms using the coding environment Hydra to produce randomized distortions and break open fixed structures of meaning.

m. Disruption

This following example takes the idea of disruption a step further—but in a softer, more integrated way. The goal here was to maintain legibility while still introducing a subtle disturbance. Instead of modifying specific gendered words, it plays with the dot above the *'i'*, replacing it with a small circle that floats through the lines of text. (Fig. m. 1) The circle becomes a recurring rhythm, an added layer that doesn't change the content directly but adds a visual pulse. It opens up a space where the reader is made aware of difference without necessarily enforcing a specific linguistic choice. The actual letter remains intact; I just changed one glyph in the typeface Work Sans by Wei Huang. A simple trick that provokes quite an effect.

n. Outline Overlap

This experiment plays with overlapping outlines to explore double meanings and simultaneity. Two letterforms are laid over each other, in one case creating a tension between male and female readings, in another inviting the reader to choose between the words Mutter and Vater. (Fig. n. 1–2) This approach touches on Judith Butler's concept that gender is not biologically fixed[89], but socially constructed through repeated actions. By layering meanings, this typographic strategy visualizes the idea that gender is performative, shifting, and never singular.

o. Stacked Forms

Stacked forms consist of two solutions, which shift the focus more clearly toward typographic design and how gender-inclusive glyphs could be meaningfully integrated into existing type systems. The first example shows a visual strategy to highlight simultaneity in gendered language. (Fig. o. 1) Instead of separating or replacing elements, all gendered components are stacked one over the other. The feminine form is placed on top, followed by the gender star as a non-binary marker in the middle, and the masculine form underneath. This kind of layered construction allows the reader to decide what they want to focus on. It offers all possible versions in one visual cluster. The second example uses uppercase characters to combine male and female forms (Fig. o. 2). It reads more fluently at first glance but doesn't leave space for non-binary identities, making it less inclusive overall. Both solutions point to the same challenge: scaling multiple characters into a single glyph without adjusting the stroke width can distort proportions. If this idea were to be refined

[89] Butler, J. (1990)

Fig. m. 1: Visual disruption created through the addition of a graphic layer, breaking the uniformity of word structures.

Fig. n. 1–2: Overlapping outlines used to suggest dual meanings and represent gendered terms in simultaneous coexistence.

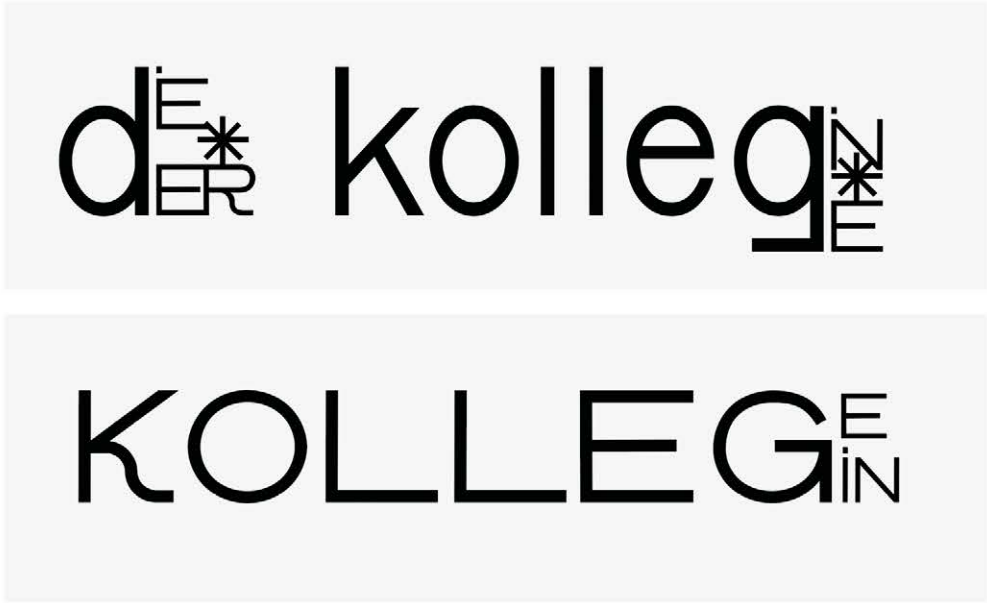

Fig. o. 1–2: Stacked forms produced by scaling and aligning multiple characters into a single glyph structure, proposing alternative ways of encoding gender information

further, the letter thickness would need careful adjustment. Readability, especially at smaller sizes, is also something to keep in mind. Still, the concept opens up a visually intriguing way of thinking about layered language.

p. Mirroring

In this example, I examined the pronoun *sier* to explore how a visually complex yet legible form could emerge—one that also represents non-binary identity through the integration of the letter *x*. By inserting *x* at the beginning, the word takes on a kind of mirroring structure. It transforms from a standard word into something that feels almost like a logotype, bold and self-contained. In some versions, the letter *s* is sliced or partially removed, which adds a strange but expressive tension. I found the lowercase variant particularly interesting, as it maintains a sense of dynamism and fluidity. (Fig. p. 1–4) Still, the more geometric uppercase experiments, with the sliced *S*, capture something powerful. The overall form becomes something in between a word and a symbol, pushing the boundaries of what gender-inclusive language can look like on a typographic level. The first part with the *x* and *s* could also be used as a sign.

q. Blending

Inspired by the typeface *DINDong* from the ByeByeBinary collective, I began experimenting with ligatures for the German language. One of the strategies *DINDong* offers for gender-inclusive writing is the blending of characters into hybrid letterforms. I find this approach particularly interesting because it addresses some of the formal issues I encountered with the stacking solutions, especially in terms of stroke consistency and visual balance. By partially merging two glyphs into one, the letters form a new sign that still feels legible and coherent within the type system. There's a visual rhythm that flows naturally, and since ligatures have a long tradition in typography, the concept doesn't feel too foreign. These blended forms can maintain the character of the original font while opening up space for inclusive interpretation. For me, this method is one of the most promising, especially if the goal is to develop a system that could reach a broader audience—people who may not yet be open to more radical or abstract solutions. The recognizability of the typeface remains intact, and even at small sizes, readability is preserved. I'll continue working with these findings in the following chapter, where I develop and apply my own set of non-binary glyphs on different typefaces.

Fig. p. 1–4: irrored letterforms abstract the word structure, shifting the appearance toward symbolic or iconic representations.

Fig. q. 1–2: Experimental hybrid glyphs blend existing and newly created characters to visualise inclusive language across French, German, and English.

CREATING NEW GLYPHS FOR EXISTING FONTS

r. Creating additional German non-binary glyphs: *DINdong* by Clara Sambot 2022

In exchange with the collective ByeByeBinary, we agreed that I would develop some German non-binary glyphs for one of their typefaces. I chose *DINdong*—not only because of its German origin, but also because the typeface already offers a broad range of expressive glyph variations and brings a very open, playful approach to the topic. "DINdong is a cheeky reworking of *Din fette Breitschrift*, originally drawn by Peter Wiegel. It replays the DIN norm in order to cleverly subvert it." [90] DINdong includes inclusive and non-binary glyphs and ligatures, along with connecting elements and alternatives to the middle dot, in an attempt to make this historically rooted typeface more inclusive. Following this mindset, I developed several core German non-binary endings such as *er•in*, *t•in*, *g•in*, as well as forms for pronouns like *•xier* and *•sein/ihr*. The system developed by ByeByeBinary works like this: if you type a middle dot before the non-binary form, the following letters are automatically transformed into the correct ligature. This makes it possible to show inclusive forms—even when a font doesn't support special glyphs—simply through the use of the middle dot as a visual signal. (Fig. r. 1)

I found this approach especially interesting because I had already been developing something similar for one of my own glyph systems. In my version, the feature is programmed in Glyphs as an alternative style set: when a middle dot is typed before the ending, the corresponding non-binary glyph appears automatically. Depending on implementation, this could also be triggered by using a double dot or an asterisk.

What I particularly like about this method is that it allows for fast and intuitive writing. Users don't need to search for special characters on the keyboard. And when copying or pasting between programs, it stays compatible—even if the specific glyph isn't supported, the text remains legible and still clearly signals an inclusive intention. Screen readers and automatic reading programs would still be able to interpret and pronounce the marker.

[90] Typotheque Genderfluid Project, n.d.

Fig. r. 1: Screenshot of the glyph overview in *Glyphs,* showing supplementary German non-binary glyphs drawn by the author, based on an existing typeface by Clara Sambot (2022)

s. Designing three glyph families with different characteristics

For the typewriter-inspired font *Dottivetti*, which I designed in 2024, I experimented with different approaches and developed three alternate sets of non-binary and inclusive glyphs. All versions are triggered by typing an asterisk, but they appear differently in the text—showing how many visual possibilities there are for designing non-binary forms. My goal was to find a solution that allows a clear and comfortable reading flow while keeping the structure of the original word intact. I analyzed how many glyph-types are actually needed to cover all implementation situations and tested different ways of positioning the letters within the new glyphs.

In the first version (Fig. s. 1), the letters are visually tied together by reusing shapes—like the dot of the *'i'* also forming the arm of the *'r'*. This gives the glyph a tight internal logic and a balanced appearance.

The second version (Fig. s. 2) connects the letters with smooth, wavy lines, referencing the ampersand in the original font. I really like the softness and flow of this solution—it feels more fluid, almost gentle.

Since both of these versions focus mostly on blending masculine and feminine forms, I also tried a version that integrates a *'+'* sign (Fig. s. 3), to clearly mark the gender-neutral position. I think this version is conceptually complete—but it's a bit harder to read, as there are more elements clashing and the structure becomes visually more complex.

All three versions explore different aspects of legibility, form, and visual rhythm. To me, they would need now more testing to observe which solutions function best.

Fig. s. 1: Inclusive glyph set *Standard*, exploring clear and minimal markers for non-binary forms.

Fig. s. 2: Inclusive glyph set *Flow*, introducing connecting curves and soft transitions to suggest movement.

Fig. s. 3: Inclusive glyph set *Plus*, showing inclusivity and visibility through extended and stylised forms.

t. Developing gendered readings in a single sign: *Ovana* by Fanny Geiser, 2015

As mentioned earlier, the collaborative nature of this project was central to its development. I had several conversations and informal exchanges with colleagues across different generations of design practice. These meetings became moments of shared reflection, discussion, and creative input.

Fanny Geiser and the team at *Studio ¡muchogusto!* generously took the time to develop and share their visual ideas. Their input brought new perspectives and inspiration to my own work. The typeface *Ovana* designed by Fanny Geiser, has a very reduced and technical character[91]. Within this framework, she sketched an idea of how the pronouns '*sie+er*' could visually connect. That idea sparked my own development of a dynamic glyph based on a double *'e'* form. Much like how some French endings indicate the gendered use of a word, this glyph brings male and female readings together in a single, sign-like shape. (Fig. t. 1) It suggests movement and diversity and creates a gentle rupture in the text flow—without interrupting readability. The interesting part is that it still retains the masculine form as a base. This way, even when generic masculine language is used, inclusion and diversity could still be made visible within the typeface itself.

u. Exploring movement and diversity in markers: *xxLiberté* by Studio ¡muchogusto!, 2024

In the typeface *xxLiberté*, Studio ¡muchogusto! designed several static variations of the gender star—each with its own visual character.[92] This exploration inspired my own experiment: to rethink the gender marker not as a fixed glyph, but as a dynamic, moving element within a variable font.

The idea was to make the presence of the gender star adjustable so it could appear almost invisible in some contexts or become a bold typographic intervention in others. A feature that could gently accompany the text or clearly disrupt it, depending on how it's used. I realized this was technically more complex than expected. Developing a functioning variable glyph requires more font engineering knowledge than I currently have. For now, this concept remains more a visual and conceptual sketch than a working tool. Still, this test addresses the possibility of more dynamic gender markers who could move, shift, and become an integrated part of the typographic design. (Fig. u. 1–2)

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[91] Geiser, F. (2025); personal communication, May 2025.

[92] Hubli O. (2025); personal communication, April 2025.

Fig. t. 1: A selection of conceptual sketches Fanny Geiser using her Typeface *Ovana*.

Fig. t. 2: Creation of an additional glyph combining male and female readings, designed by Andrea Dreier.

Fig. u. 1: Variations of gender stars included in the typeface *xxLiberté*, desgned by MuchoGusto.

Fig. u. 2: The gender star as a supplementary feature, transformed in a variable font and adapted by the author.

PROGRAMMING TOOLS TO TEST TYPOGRAPHIC INTERVENTIONS

One of the main challenges in inclusive writing is the lack of standards and general awareness. People often just don't know what the correct form would be, that certain typefaces include non-binary glyphs, or how to actually use them in everyday writing. In standard text processing programs like InDesign, Word, or Pages, selecting different alternate glyphs is often not very intuitive. That's why I began thinking about possible helpers that could make these nonbinary Glyph options more visible and easier to test.

In the final part of my practical research, I explored potential solutions by designing new glyphs, programming OpenType features within the font's feature settings, and coding a digital interface where users can try out and interact with various inclusive typographic options.

v. Search and Replace with Non-Binary Terms

Inspired by existing translation tools like DeepL or QuillBot, I developed a tool that identifies non-inclusive language and offers suggestions for transforming it into gender-inclusive writing. (Fig. v. 1)

The user can either type or paste text into the left box. There are then two options: clicking *'Check'* highlights gendered terms in yellow, while '*Adapt'* automatically replaces them with inclusive alternatives and displays the result in the right box. The tool is connected to the database of *geschicktgendern.de*[93]. which currently offers over 2000 gender-inclusive formulations. Another relevant resource is the *RespACT-Leitfaden Sprachempfehlung Hochschulen Schweiz*[94], which provides detailed recommendations on how to write and speak about trans and non-binary people.

One of the main challenges in this approach is adapting pronouns dynamically and in grammatically correct ways—something this test version does not yet solve. Still, I see strong potential in this direction. In the future, existing translation tools might offer a setting to generate a non-binary version of German. This could help users experience how accessible inclusive language can be, and reduce the hesitation or uncertainty that often prevents its use.

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[93] geschicktgendern.de (n.d.).

[94] RespACT (n.d.).

Fig. v. 1: Automated replacement of gendered terms with non-binary alternatives. The programmed tool is linked to a database of gender-inclusive formulations.

w. From ‘o’ to Connector: Customizing a non-binary Glyph

Not all words—such as *Mitarbeiter* (working people)—can be meaningfully replaced with gender-neutral forms like *Mitarbeitende*. In some cases, like *Schüler und Schülerinnen* forms like *Schülerenden d*on’t exist. Here, gender-inclusive writing with visual markers—e.g. *Schüler*innen*—becomes necessary. This approach is often chosen to make diversity explicitly visible—it draws attention and may create a moment of productive irritation. But how can such visual marking be implemented in a way that’s more integrated into the design of the typeface itself—without relying on characters like the asterisk or underscore?

I developed a small how-to for a design hack that transforms the letter *‘o’* into a connecting element. Using a font editing tool like Glyphs or FontLab, the upper half of the *‘o’* is isolated and assigned to another character. (Fig. w. 1–4)

In my example, I assigned the modified form to the bullet-point glyph. To ensure it connects smoothly with the surrounding letters, the shape needs to be carefully adjusted—especially in terms of height and spacing. But overall, it’s not a very complicated process. I tested it in two existing typefaces: *Spezia by Luzi Type* and *Purple by Binnenland.* Once created, the connector can be used freely—as a gender-inclusive marker placed between word stems and endings, before words, or even within words, giving the text a more diverse and fluid appearance. Since it must be inserted manually, it allows for very specific and playful placement. It becomes a typographic tool to reflect the diversity, adaptability, and evolving character of inclusive language. It’s important to note that this solution only works within the modified font—otherwise, the standard bullet point will reappear.

Fig. w. 1–4: From *'o'* to connector: Conceptual principle for developing a custom non-binary glyph. The system is designed and tested to be adaptable across different typefaces.

x. Exploring Glyph Alternates

Using alternative glyphs is a key typographic strategy to reflect linguistic and gender diversity within a single font system. It allows designers to choose between several inclusive forms, each developed for different visual or communicative needs. The online tool I created here functions like a digital type specimen: users can type their own text and see how the different non-binary glyph options behave. In this example, the glyphs were developed for the typeface Dottivetti by Andrea Dreier (see also chapter s. *Designing three glyph families with different characteristics*). Buttons allow users to switch between different versions and compare them quickly and intuitively. (Fig. x. 1)

Maybe in the future, a standardized Unicode assignment could enable these glyphs to display correctly across various fonts—as long as the glyphs are implemented in those fonts. Otherwise, the punctuation remains visible, preserving the non-binary reading style. (Fig. x. 2)

There are currently no official rules for non-binary glyphs for German. The group ByeByeBinary has already begun working on standardizing Unicode values in French-speaking regions, and initial proposals have been documented.

y. Automatic Replacement triggered by Punctuation

For this example, I programmed an interface that allows testing automatic glyph replacement triggered by punctuation or specific word combinations. This kind of logic is already well established in German. For instance, when 'ss' becomes *'ß'*, or when ligatures like '*fl*' appear automatically as ligatures in words like fleissig. The same principle is used in French, where '*œ*' is inserted in words like *cœur* as a standard ligature. In all of these cases, the system replaces characters automatically, as long as ligatures are enabled in the text settings. Applied to gender-inclusive writing, this would mean that typing an asterisk (or any assigned glyph) before an ending could automatically trigger and insert a non-binary glyph. So as the features section of a font can include coded instructions that define which glyph combinations should be automatically trigger a specific ligature, this system would make things much easier for users. There's no need to manually search for a special glyph, just by typing the system does the work in the background. (Fig. y. 1–3)

Following this idea, I programmed the most relevant glyph combinations needed to visualize gender-inclusive forms in German. What I find particularly interesting is that this method also works in fonts that don't contain specific non-binary

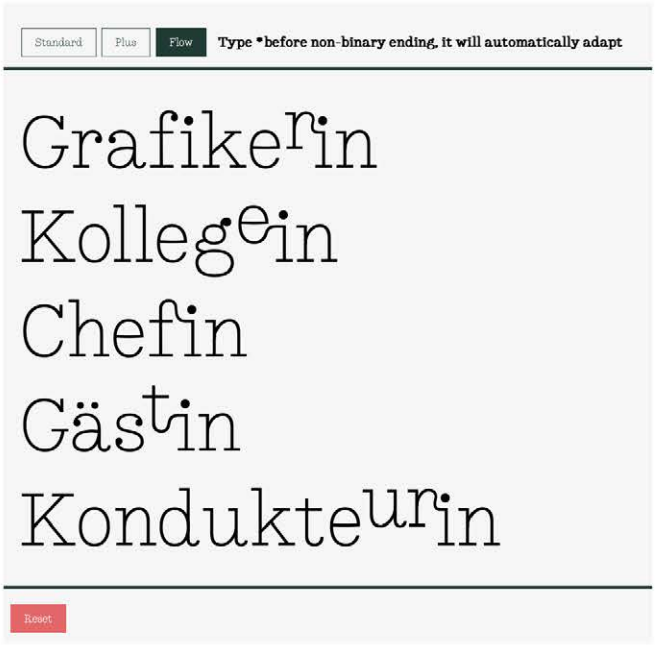

Fig. x. 1: Web-based interface programmed by the author to test non-binary glyph alternates. Users can enter text and preview stylistic variants including “Standard”, “Flow”, and “Plus”.

Fig. x. 2: Interface for testing non-binary glyph alternates in a custom type tool. Users can input text and automatically preview different stylistic

Fig. y. 1–3: Automatic replacement of glyphs with ligatures triggered by letters and punctuation marks.

glyphs. In those cases, the asterisk simply remains visible, but still functions as a recognizable marker of inclusivity.

From my perspective, this solution holds the greatest potential for simple and effective implementation of non-binary glyphs—especially since many users are already familiar with setting visual markers like the middle dot, asterisk, or underscore in front of feminine endings.

z. Automatic replacement triggered by letter combinations

This idea of automatic replacement, as described in experiment y, can be taken a step further by shifting some of the agency to the font system itself. In this experiment, I customized the typeface *Glosa by Dino dos Santos* by adding code to its feature settings. Instead of displaying gendered forms—female, male, or non-binary—certain letter combinations are now automatically replaced with a symbolic glyph that represents all genders. The focus of the experiment was on the systematic replacement, not on the creation of the symbolic glyph itself. (Fig. z. 1)

The programmed interface allows users to type a sample of text see how the replacement behaves in real time. Inspired by Sarah Gephart's idea of the "hypothetical hack" a unisex glyph that iOS could suggest every time a user began typing a gendered pronoun"[95] I created a universal symbol that appears when someone types gender-specific pronouns like *sie*, *er*, *es*, *ihr*, *seines*, ... or when a word ending is typed with *-innen* followed by a additional space. (Fig. z. 2) It's a small typographic intervention that gently disrupts habitual reading patterns and draws attention to the presence—or the absence—of gender in language.

I hope this selection of experiments has offered a broad insight and a variety of impulses for what might be possible when working with gender-inclusive language—where there's potential and which directions might turn out to be more complex in terms of implementation or everyday use. It also shows that there are alternatives to the more common non-binary solutions like gender-neutral wording or binary forms marked with asterisks or underscores. The examples explore what else could be done—both typographically and conceptually. In the last chapter, I will formulate an idea of what could grow from this research going forward.

[95] Riechers, A. (2018)

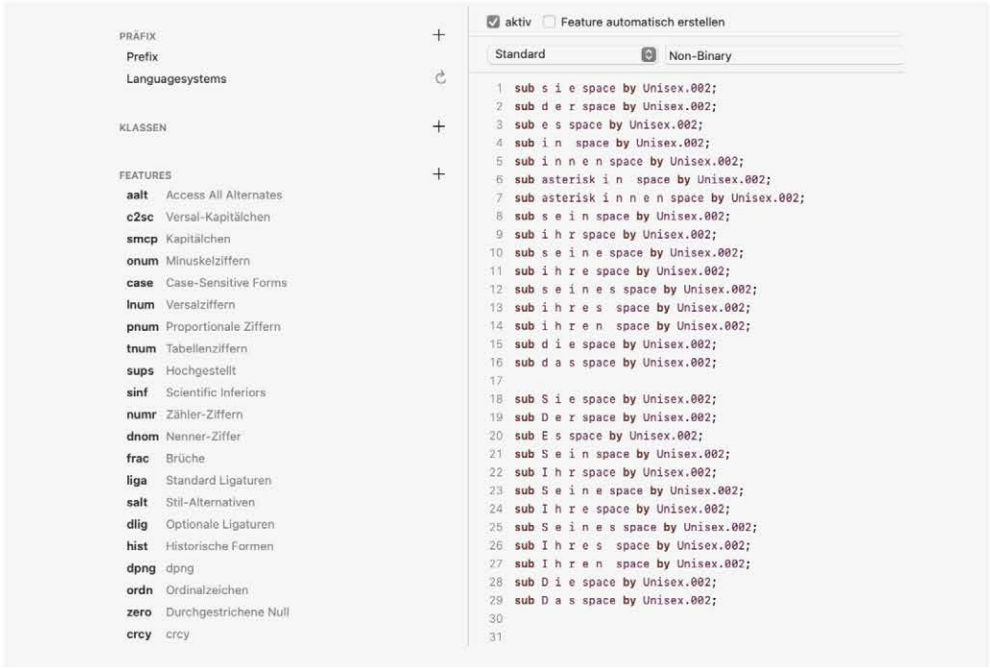

Fig. z. 1: Screenshot of custom OpenType feature code in Glyphs (font editor) used to trigger automatic glyph replacement.

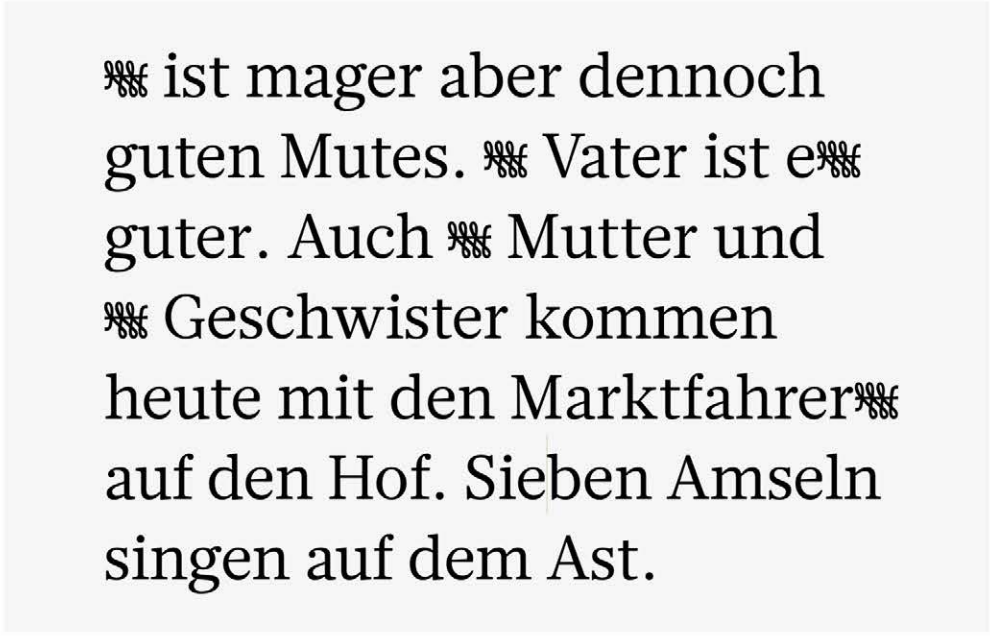

Fig. z. 2: Text example showing automatic glyph replacement triggered by letter combinations, illustrated with varying indicator styles.

Conclusion

This project has taken me through a complex and rich landscape—from linguistic theory to questions of identity, from technical experiments to collective thinking. What began as a curiosity about non-binary glyphs evolved into a multidimensional visual inquiry that spans form, visibility, and participation. Along the way, I encountered activist communities, poetic proposals, open questions, and experimental tools. Each encounter opened another door—sometimes to a solution, sometimes to a new challenge. This thesis might end here, but the process is far from complete. What I have developed is not a final conclusion, but a beginning—a visual and conceptual groundwork that invites continuation.

Throughout the process, I approached language as a visual structure and design as a method of intervention. My research was intentionally multi-layered: I analyzed publications, conducted a survey, hosted a workshop, experimented with type systems, and exchanged with practitioners from various fields. What emerged was not a single solution, but a field of tension, between institutional norms and activist strategies, between readability and disruption, between linguistic structures and visual gestures.

I have gathered a great deal of information along the way of my research, already processed and shared parts of it, and developed it further in exchange with others. Collective processes have started to take form: points of connection, ideas for visual implementation, first technical strategies, design decisions, and social reflections—all of this now exists as documented material.

One of the most promising technical approaches in this process was working directly with font coding. OpenType features and replacement methods allow designers to define how a typeface behaves—how it reacts to certain combinations, how it can include visual markers. This opens a path to implement alternative glyphs in a functional way. But this also revealed how little typographic infrastructure currently exists for non-binary writing in German. There are only a handful of typefaces that include non-binary glyphs, and no shared standards or guidelines across German-speaking regions. The gap between need and availability became clear.

This revealed a central tension in the project: while type design can propose new forms and open visual space, its actual impact depends on much more—shared standards, supportive infrastructures, and committed communities. Design alone cannot resolve the complexity of gender-inclusive language.

Font development is also a highly specialized discipline, and this project only scratches the surface at that point. To create functional, inclusive type systems, we will need more professionals, more dialogue, and more shared knowledge.

And because I encountered a strong interest from others for sharing knowledge, tools, and strategies, I decided to make my research accessible and continue it as a living practice: by founding *Post Binary Type Lab*.

It is a website functioning as an open, interdisciplinary platform where visual, technical, and social questions of inclusive type design can be developed further. The Lab invites contributions from design, linguistics, and education. It documents approaches, explains technical features, and offers playful tools for experimentation. Above all, it gathers and shares what I've collected throughout this project—with the goal of fostering dialogue through a research-driven design platform that brings together typographic inquiry, feminist linguistics, and open collaboration. It documents alternative glyphs, explains technical strategies, and invites others to contribute their own experiments. It's not about finding definitive forms but about shaping possibilities, together. Please see appendix, for further information about the content and structure of the platform.

This work doesn't end with a fixed answer—and it was never supposed to. It aims to expand the space in which inclusive writing and visual form can be thought together. As a designer, I believe we have a responsibility—and the creative tools—to question defaults, make alternatives visible, and offer other ways of seeing, naming, and belonging.

Typography will not solve the problem of gender injustice. But it can help to reveal the structures behind it. It can support those who search for new forms of expression. It can slow things down, break reading habits, irritate, and invite new solutions. That's why I see the end of this thesis as the beginning of a broader, open, and collective process.

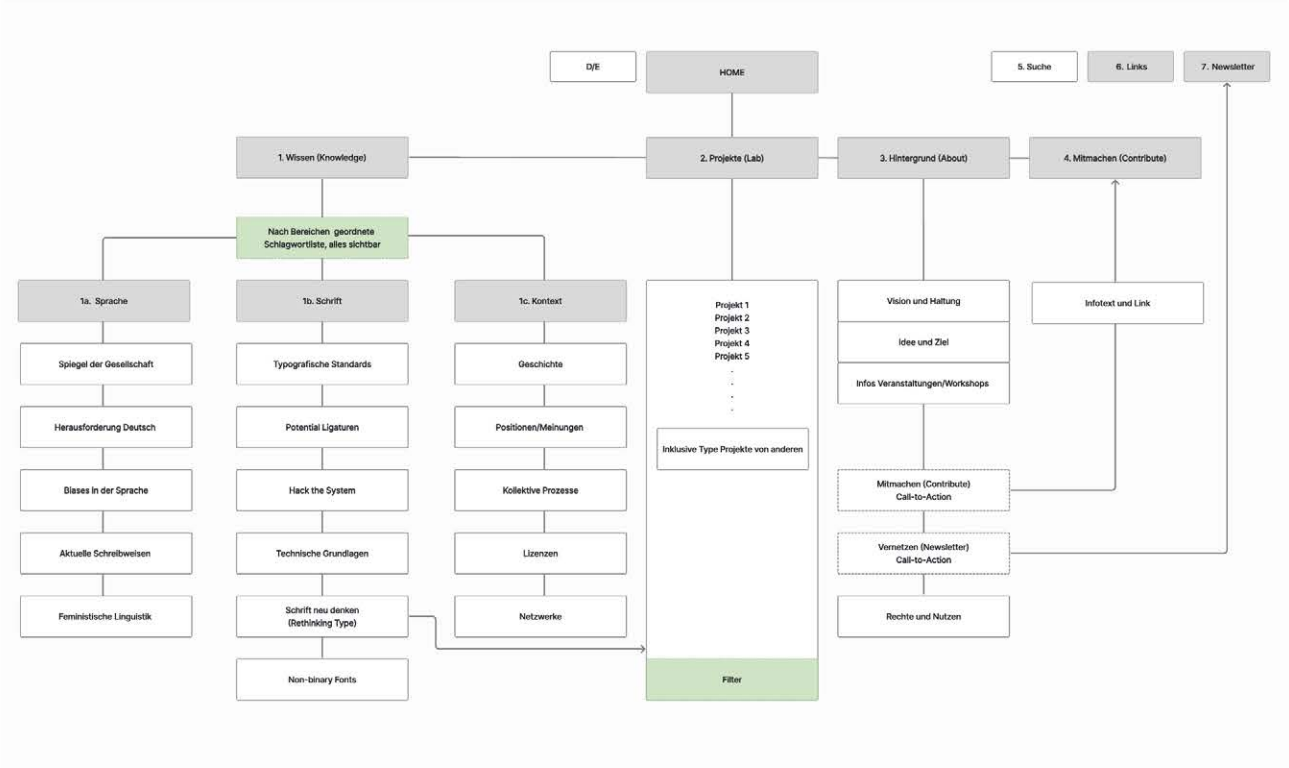

Fig. 19: Sitemap of postbinarytypelab.com: Overview of the platform's structure, showing the navigation logic, content areas, and interconnections between sections.

Glossary

Selection of relevant expressions mentioned thesis

Gender-neutral: Refers to language or design that avoids gendered references. For example, by using neutral terms or forms that don't indicate a specific gender.

Gender-inclusive: Aims to explicitly include all genders. Often through the use of typographic markers (like the colon or asterisk) or phrasing that moves beyond the binary gender system.

Inclusive: A broader term referring to strategies that aim to acknowledge and represent marginalized groups related to gender, language, and visual representation.

Non-binary: Describes people who do not (exclusively) identify as male or female. In language and design, the term is key to developing forms of representation that go beyond binary norms.

Non-binary typography: Adds or adapts visual Elements to include non-binary identities.

Post-binary typography: Challenges the entire framework of gender binary in design on several visual levels.

Signs: Visual or linguistic markers that carry meaning. This can include punctuation used in gender-inclusive language (like the asterisk or underscore) as well as broader semiotic elements within type and layout.

Fonts: A specific digital style of a typeface, including weight, size, and spacing. Fonts influence the legibility and tone of gender-inclusive forms in written language

Typeface: A general term for the design of letters and characters.

Glyphs: The smallest visual units of writing. Individual shapes that represent a letter, symbol, or punctuation mark and visualize the typographic character

Unicode: Standardized system, assigns a unique number (code point) to every character used. Ensures consistent encoding, representation, and handling of text, regardless of platform, language, or program.

Selection of relevant characters[96][97]

Asteriks: Usually a superscript, primarily for marking referents and keywords. In European typography, it was widely used to mark a Person's era if birth [U +002A]

Bullet: A fat midpoint, not always round, used as a typographic flag. Bullets are usually hung in the margin to mark items in a list or centered in the measure to separate larger blocks of text [U+2022, + 25c9, +25E6]

Lowline: This is the standard ISO character, positioned as a baseline rule. Not to be confused with underscore. [U +005F]

Midpoint: An ancient European mark of punctuation, widely used in typography to flag items in a vertical list and to separate items in a horizontal line. A closely spaced midpoint is also used to separate letters in Catalan. Same sign used in mathematics. [U +00B7]

Underscore: A diacritic required for many African and Native American languages and useful for some purposes in English. Alternative to Under-dot. [U +0332]

Virgule: An oblique stroke, used by medieval scribes and many later writers, as a form of comma. It is also used to build level fractions, to represent a line break when verse is set as prose, and in dates, addresses, and elsewhere as a sign of separation. [U +002F]

[96] decodeunicode. (n.d.).

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Fig. c.1:
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Fig. j.1–5:
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Fig. k.1–4:
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Fig. l.1–3:
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Appendix

The materials in the appendix offer deeper insight into the practical and collaborative aspects of this project. Since both the survey participants and workshop contributors were German-speaking, all documents are presented in German. This choice also reflects the intention to seek funding for the continuation and continuation and realization of the project in a German-speaking context.

The appendix contains:

1. Concept paper for the PostBinary Type Lab, describing its goals and proposed structure
2. Analysis of the online survey conducted during the research phase
3. Summary and reflections on the collaborative workshop held in spring 2025
4. List of analyzed possible cases for German ligatures

These documents provide further context for the research process and form a basis for future development of the project.

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