



# Pronoun Specification in German

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## Abstract

The academic and public discussion about addressing and referring to non-binary individuals in German is still in its infancy. This discussion encompasses novel reference procedures and pronouns, as well as the specification of (preferred) pronouns, such as those included in email signatures. In a large-scale online study conducted in 2024 focusing on gender-neutral language usage at the University of Hamburg, I collected comprehensive data from 3,568 participants. The survey also included a question about the usage of pronouns in email signatures; 442 participants (12%) reported specifying their pronouns. The analysis explores the ways employed to specify pronouns and the form and combination of pronouns, considering the context of the German pronominal system. In addition, many participants used the question to comment on pronoun specifications. These comments were evaluated through qualitative content analysis, revealing that, beyond simply specifying pronouns or expressing general agreement, numerous reasons for rejection and non-usage are provided. Linguistic arguments play a subordinate role in this context, in contrast to an unsubstantiated, sometimes vehement rejection and justifications rooted in the assumed (strict) gender binary. The results are discussed in relation to previous research, and potential conclusions are outlined.

**Keywords:** pronouns; gender-neutral language; non-binary; linguistics; survey study

## 1. Introduction

The specification of pronouns in email signatures is a highly topical issue. In April 2025, the German press reported that this has become part of a broader cultural battle, with claims that the current Trump administration would refuse to cooperate with reporters who include pronouns in their signatures (Gupta, 2025). In general, specifying pronouns serves to address persons sharing their pronouns correctly, i.e. in the sense of these persons, and to refer to them correctly—primarily to prevent misgendering.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, this linguistic practice involves an explicit positioning of the person specifying pronouns (Brown, 2024, p. 244). It can be seen as an aspect of gender self-determination and self-identification (Zimman, 2019)—and the

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<sup>1</sup> Even though pronouns are often regarded as direct indices of gender (Zimman, 2019, p. 159), the sharing of pronouns does not automatically imply a statement about the gender of the person in question (Brown, 2024, p. 248). For a more details discussion of these relationships, see Zimman (2019) and Brown (2024).

practice may also serve to index social register, politeness and community identity (King & Crowley, 2023, p.79).

There are several linguistic practices for sharing or specifying pronouns, such as during face-to-face introductions, on name badges, in bios or in email signatures (e.g., Brown, 2024; Nordmarken, 2019). These practices originated in trans communities and have since been adopted by cis people as well. At the same time, a meta-linguistic discourse about pronoun sharing has emerged (King & Crowley, 2023, p. 80). This paper focuses on the sharing of pronouns in email signatures (Nordmarken, 2019, p. 55; King & Crowley, 2023, p. 81; Huffman et al., 2021, p. 227), henceforth: pronoun specification. It addresses the following research questions: What strategies for pronoun specification exist in German, which pronouns are specified, and what attitudes toward pronoun specification exist?

To date, this specific context has not been explicitly examined. Most existing studies on sharing pronouns focus mainly on the English-speaking world, take a—necessary—trans perspective and employ ethnographic interview methods (e.g., McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2018; Nordmarken, 2019; Zimman, 2019; Brown, 2024; Raclaw, 2025). King and Crowley briefly address pronoun specification and state: “The inclusion of pronouns in email signatures serves a similar function to that of pronouns in bios but signifies the move of this practice from social spaces to professional spaces.” (King & Crowley, 2023, p. 81). Regarding pronoun specifications in these professional settings, Ale-Ebrahim et al. (2023) investigate the opinions and attitudes toward pronoun specifications provided by existing workplace systems and platforms. They find that, above all, the lack of flexibility and control fails to meet the needs of trans and non-binary participants. Additionally, Silkey (2024) demonstrates—through an experimental study—that various nudging strategies can increase pronoun specification among participants.

For German, research on pronouns from this perspective remains scarce—there is no existing work specifically on the explicit specification of pronouns.<sup>2</sup> So far, studies primarily refer to the evaluation and usage of neopronouns by non-binary people (Löhr, 2022), to the theoretical discussion about neopronouns in German (Lind, 2024), and to one survey study on usage, familiarity, acceptance, and possible usage of reference strategies for non-binary people in German (Sörries-Vorberger, forthcoming). Thus, the academic and public discussions concerning how non-binary/non-cis people are addressed and referenced in German are still in their early stages. This ongoing discourse encompasses novel reference strategies and pronouns, as well as the specification of (preferred) pronouns, such as those included in email signatures. Pronoun specifications in email signatures should also be understood within the broader context of organizational and institutional communication (e.g., Manning, 1992). Specifically for the German context, it is important to note that there is no official language policy beyond spelling regulations (e.g., Adler & Beyer, 2018), and consequently, no state-level or consistent regulations governing pronoun specifications.<sup>3</sup>

With this study, I aim to contribute to the examination of pronoun specification in German—and more broadly to the field of pronoun usage and sharing in general. First, I will describe the data and methods employed, followed by a presentation and discussion of selected findings related to procedures, attitudes, and stances regarding pronoun specification. The paper will end with a discussion of the entire study and concluding remarks.

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<sup>2</sup> Steriopolo and Aussoleil (2023) studied pronoun usage in a queer community in Berlin, but their research was conducted within a multilingual, primarily English-speaking context.

<sup>3</sup> Due to the structure of the study, the two perspectives are viewed here more as potential connections (see sections 2 and 5).

## 2. Methods

The study is based on data collected from a survey on the usage of gender-neutral language at the University of Hamburg, conducted as part of the project “Geschlechtergerechte Sprache an der Universität Hamburg” (funded by Women’s Advancement Fund of University of Hamburg) in October and November 2024. This large-scale online study aimed to gather data on knowledge, usage, attitudes and experiences related to gender-neutral language usage at the university. A total of 3,568 university members took part: 2140 were students, 720 were administrative staff, and 708 were academic staff. Regarding gender, 1924 identified as female, 1343 as male, 127 as diverse, and 174 chose ‘no answer’.<sup>4</sup> The data was processed, documented, and published (Sörries-Vorberger, 2025).<sup>5</sup>

The relevant question for this study is 2.4: *Führen Sie in Ihrer E-Mailsignatur Ihre präferierten Pronomen auf? & (Wenn ja, in welcher Form?) Nutzen Sie bitte das Kommentarfeld für Anmerkungen zu Ihrer Auswahl.* [‘Do you specify your preferred pronouns in your e-mail signature? & (If yes, in what way?) Please use the comment field to comment on your selection.’]. Participants could select either *yes* or *no* for the first sub-question and, if applicable, provide an answer to the open-ended second sub-question on the same page. All participants responded to the first mandatory sub-question. A total of 826 participants commented on the open-ended question related to pronoun specification—almost twice as many as those who indicated *yes* (see below). This means that, as intended, information on the explicit specification of pronouns was obtained. In addition, many participants used the comment field to provide varied remarks about the specifying of pronouns and pronouns in general. Although this was not the original intention, it resulted in valuable data and enabled further analyses.

First, I quantified the number of participants specifying pronouns and systematically grouped the various ways in which pronouns were indicated, considering both the pronouns themselves and the manner of their specification in signatures. To analyze the additional responses, i.e. the comments, I conducted a qualitative content analysis based on Mayring (2022). After a close reading of all comments, I annotated the data and inductively developed initial content categories. In a second step, I transferred these content categories to the data and assigned the comments to the categories in a detailed process, with the categories being continuously reviewed and adapted throughout the process. Subsequently, I consolidated the categories into broader main categories (see the category system in the appendix). I carried out this process twice independently of each other. Additionally, two other individuals independently classified half of the comments each using the developed category system, without any further instructions. I have compared my classifications with theirs in detail, both qualitatively and quantitatively. The Pearson correlation coefficient between the categorizations was 0.92, indicating a relatively high level of consistency and thus of reliability. Discrepancies were discussed with colleagues and subsequently resolved by me through a final classification.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> While the analyses do not explicitly focus on the correlations between the results and the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants, some findings can be contextualized by this composition. The gender categories were based on the official classification of the University of Hamburg, with “Divers” representing the legal ‘third’ gender entry under German law.

<sup>5</sup> The conduct of this study was in accordance with the ethical standards of the University of Hamburg and the applicable legal regulations of Germany. The study was approved by the University of Hamburg’s presidential board and the staff council. Participation in the anonymized survey was voluntary, and all participants were informed about the purpose of the study prior to participation. Participants could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The data collected have been made publicly accessible in adherence to strict data protection and personal rights regulations.

<sup>6</sup> I would like to thank Lykka Hagedorn, Melina Lutz, and Tom-Bennet Troczinski for their support.

Since there was no specific question directing the comments, they exhibit high heterogeneity in both form and content, which should be considered regarding the results. I also quantified the prevalence of each main and subcategory. In 119 cases, responses could be assigned to multiple subcategories, which may lead to deviations in the figures but do not cause any distortion in the weighting. The following example demonstrates multiple assignment: *Ich habe keine eMail Signatur eingerichtet. Aber selbst mit einer Signatur würde ich meine Pronomen nicht angeben, da ich davon ausgehe, dass es im Kontext, in dem ich meistens agiere, negativ aufgefasst würde.* [‘I haven’t set up an email signature. But even if I had a signature, I wouldn’t include my pronouns, as I assume that in the context in which I mostly operate, it would be perceived negatively.’]. The comment is divided into two parts and can be assigned to both the ‘No Signature’ category and the ‘Justification: Possible Social Consequences’ category.

Using this classification approach, I was also able to incorporate all comments and to assign the pronoun specifications to a corresponding main category.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 General

Regarding pronoun specifications, 442 of the 3,568 participants (12%) indicated that they include their pronouns in their email signature, while 3,126 (88%) did not. This suggests that pronoun specification is rather uncommon at the University of Hamburg—even if there are no comparable data for Germany. Among those 442 participants who specify pronouns, 288 are female, 85 are male, 45 are diverse and 24 did not select an answer (see table 1). In other words, the majority of people who indicate pronouns identify as binary. Considering these numbers relative to the overall composition of participants (see section 2), we see that 35% of diverse participants specify pronouns, compared to 15% of female participants, 14% of those who did not choose an answer, and only 6% of male participants. This indicates that, proportionally, a higher percentage of people beyond the female-male-binary use their pronouns in email signatures at the University of Hamburg. Among students, 209 individuals (10%) include their pronouns in their email signatures, compared to 121 administrative staff (17%) and 112 academic staff (16%). This distribution should be interpreted within the broader context of overall signature usage.<sup>7</sup>

*Table 1: Composition of participants (gender and member group) and responses regarding pronoun specification*

		Usage	Non-Usage	Usage (relative)
Gender	female	288	1636	15%
	male	85	1258	6%
	diverse	45	85	35%
	no answer	24	150	14%
Member Group	students	209	1931	10%
	administrative staff	121	599	17%
	academic staff	112	596	16%

<sup>7</sup> All observed differences between gender and member groups are statistically significant. For gender, chi-square = 119.69,  $p = 2.2e-16$ ; for member groups, chi-square = 34.178,  $p = 3.787e-08$ .

As mentioned, all 826 comments were categorized according to content, resulting in the following main categories: Usage, Agreement, Rejection, Non-Usage and Others. Figure 1 presents an overview of these main categories along with the number of comments assigned to each, sorted by frequency.

In the following sections, I will discuss the main categories ‘Rejection’, ‘Non-Usage’ and ‘Usage’ in more detail. The main category ‘Agreement’ includes comments where participants state they have not yet specified pronouns but intend to do so because of the survey (41), as well as comments that agree with indications in cases of ambiguous names (12) or comments that express general agreement without further elaboration (5). The category ‘Others’ comprises comments indicating that no signature is used (33), that the people in question have not yet engaged with the topic (8), that the issue pertains to the form of address rather than pronouns (7), that the question was not understood (7), or that the participants would like more information on the topic (3).

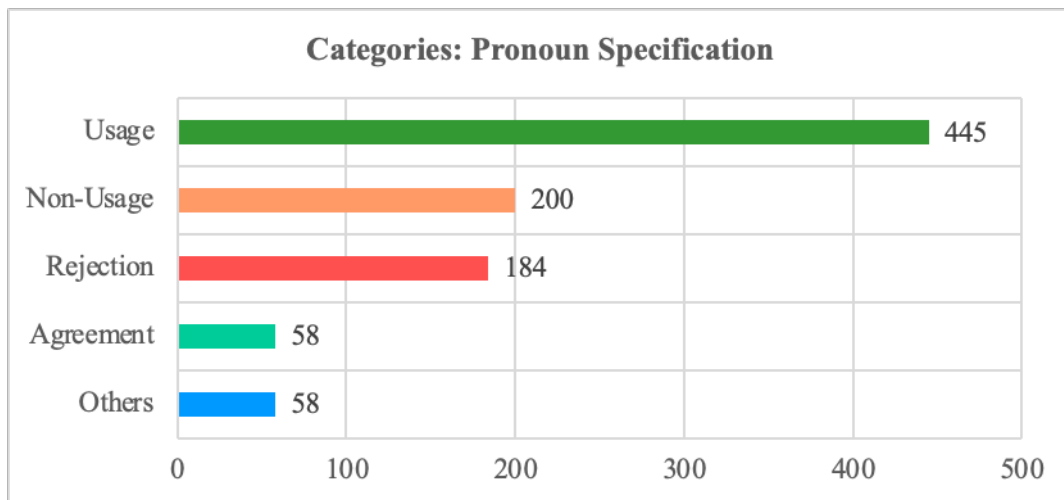


Figure 1: *Quantified Main Categories: Pronoun Specification*

### 3.2 Rejection

The main category ‘Rejection’ reflects a fundamental opposition rather than merely the absence of pronoun specification. In some cases, there are overlaps between the categories ‘Rejection’ and ‘Non-Usage’, which should not be viewed as sharply distinct but rather as endpoints of a continuum—both refer to comments on ‘no’-answers to the first question. Rejection is characterized by a clearly expressed, strongly held opposing stance. Table 2 shows the subcategories of ‘Rejection,’ along with the number of comments assigned to each, including original example comments, as they were entered, and their translations.

Table 2: Subcategories: Rejection, Numbers, Examples, and Translations

Subcategory	Number	Example	Translation
Without Justification	68	<i>Auf keinen Fall!!!!!!!!!!!!</i>	No way!!!!!!!!!!!!
Justification: Unnecessity	32	<i>Halte ich für überflüssig.</i>	I think that's superfluous.
Linguistic-Communicative Justification	19	<i>Das ist Blödsinn und behindert die Kommunikation und den Lesefluss</i>	This is nonsense and hinders communication and the flow of reading
Justification: Gender Emphasis	14	<i>Das ist eher geschlechtsverstärkend.</i>	This is rather gender reinforcing.
Justification: Encroachment	14	<i>Ich finde das albern und übergriffig</i>	I find that silly and encroaching
Justification: Biological Gender Binary	12	<i>Das ist für mich der größte Quatsch. [...] Es gibt zwei Geschlechter: Mann und Frau.</i>	That's the biggest nonsense for me. [...] There are two sexes: man and woman.
Political Justification	7	<i>Ich halte die Identitätspolitik in teilen als gefährliche Ideologie. Ich werde ihre Symboliken nicht weitertragen.</i>	I regard identity politics in part as a dangerous ideology. I will not spread its symbols.
Justification: Binary Unambiguity	7	<i>Nein, man sieht mir schließlich an, dass ich eine Frau bin. Alles Weitere finde ich modernen Unsinn.</i>	No, after all, you can see that I'm a woman. I think everything else is modern nonsense.
No Understanding	4	<i>Verstehe das Konzept nicht</i>	Don't understand the concept
Justification: Intimacy	4	<i>es geht niemanden etwas an, was ich als Pronomen präferiere</i>	it's nobody's business what I prefer as a pronoun
Justification: Minority	3	<i>Das Verwenden von anderen Pronomen als die von den Richtlinien zum Gebrauch der deutschen Sprache empfohlen sind ein Geschwür von Minderheiten. Sie sind daher abzulehnen.</i>	The use of pronouns other than those recommended by the guidelines for the use of the German language are an ulcer of minorities. They should therefore be rejected.

The 68 comments in the 'Without Justification' category express a fundamental rejection and aversion to the topic without providing any arguments. Many of the responses contain insults ('Pronouns are mentally ill.') or clear expressions of reluctance. An additional 32 participants share a similar opinion but justify their rejection by deeming pronoun specification unnecessary or superfluous.

In the next subcategory (19 comments), the rejection is justified with reference to linguistic standardization (spelling, grammar), potential misunderstandings (such as confusion between forms) and the complication of communication (e.g., messy emails). Fourteen participants oppose the practice because they see it as an overemphasis on gender, with both traditional and postmodern gender concepts being referenced—such as the claim that “gender designation is outdated.”

A further group of fourteen individuals reject specifying pronouns because they perceive it as an encroachment or form of dictation over others. Twelve people explicitly or implicitly refer to a clear binary nature of biological sex as a basis for rejection. The seven comments with political justifications can be divided into two groups: those rejecting pronoun specification as

part of what they see as dangerous identity politics, and those opposing it from a ‘traditional’ feminist perspective.

Additionally, seven participants refer to the unambiguous (binary) gender identification, whereby gender is emphasized more than sex in this case. Four respondents admit to having no understanding of the concept of specifying pronouns, while three reject the practice because they perceive it as an invasion of privacy or an overly intimate information in university contexts. Four more dismiss the practice because they believe it only affects a minority. In the above example of this subcategory, the verbal, sometimes inhuman, sharpness of some commentators becomes clear, as does the multiple attribution, as a linguistic argument is also used here (see section 2)—although it is not entirely clear what is meant by these guidelines.

Overall, these comments reveal a range of deeply rooted and often emotive reasons for rejecting pronoun specification, ranging from linguistic and ideological concerns to outright hostility.

### 3.3 Non-Usage

The category ‘Non-Usage’ indicates that there is no (fundamental) rejection of pronoun specification; rather, respondents partly display a neutral or positive attitude towards the practice. However, several reasons are provided in the comments for choosing not to specify pronouns. In some contexts, there are overlaps with the category ‘Rejection’ (see 3.2). Table 3 shows the subcategories of ‘Non-Usage,’ structured similarly to the first table.

Table 3: Subcategories: Non-Usage, Numbers, Examples, and Translations

Subcategory	Number	Example	Translation
Justification: Unambiguous Name	80	<i>Ich halte das mit einem durch den Namen klar zuordbaren Geschlecht, dem ich mich auch zugehörig fühle, für mich persönlich nicht für notwendig</i>	I personally don’t think it’s necessary. I have a gender that can be clearly assigned by name and to which I also feel I belong
Justification: Personal Irrelevance	60	<i>Ich denke nicht, dass es besonders notwendig/wichtig für mich ist, also gebe ich das bisher nicht mit an</i>	I don’t think it’s particularly necessary/important for me, thus, I don’t specify it yet
Justification: Possible Social Consequences	13	<i>In den meisten Situation fühle ich mich durch die Angabe meiner Pronomen geoutet und möchte das vermeiden</i>	In most situations, I feel outed by giving my pronouns and would like to avoid this
With Tolerance	11	<i>Ich persönlich tue es nicht, habe aber auch kein Problem damit wenn andere sich dafür entscheiden es zu tun.</i>	I personally don’t do it, but I also have no problem if others decide to do it.
Justification: Fear	10	<i>zu viel Angst vor Diskriminierung durch Lehrende</i>	Too much fear of discrimination by lecturers
Justification: Indecision/No Decision	8	<i>Ich bin unentschlossen was meine präferierten Pronomen sind.</i>	I’m undecided what my preferred pronouns are.
Justification: No Preferences	7	<i>Ich habe keine präferierten Pronomen.</i>	I don’t have any preferred pronouns.
Justification: Superiors	4	<i>weil meine Vorgesetzte das stört, sonst würde ich es gerne machen</i>	because my superior doesn’t like it, otherwise I would like to do it

Justification: Rarity	4	<i>Ich würde gerne, aber es machen nicht genug Leute, um mich damit wohl zu fühlen.</i>	I would love to, but not enough people do it to make me feel comfortable with it.
Justification: Guidelines	2	<i>Wir haben eine Richtlinie für Signaturen in unserer Einrichtung, die aktuell noch keine Pronomen vorsieht - das soll aber in Kürze geändert werden und dann werde ich meine Pronomen auch angeben.</i>	We have guidelines for signatures in our institution that currently does not provide for pronouns—but this is to be changed shortly and then I will also specify my pronouns.
Justification: Habit	1	<i>Mache es aus Gewohnheit nicht</i>	Don't do it out of habit

Most comments in this main category (80) refer to an unambiguous gender-specific name within a binary gender framework or to an unambiguous gender-specific (job) title. Due to this assumed clarity, these participants do not specify their pronouns. Sixty participants state that they personally see no reason to specify pronouns or that they personally do not care about doing so. Thirteen individuals justify their non-usage by expressing concerns about social consequences, such as ridiculousness, group divisions, unpopularity, or the need to come out, which could be associated with specifying particular pronouns. Eleven participants do not include pronouns in their signatures but explicitly express their tolerance—with or without further explanation—either stating that everyone should decide for themselves or welcoming others to do so.

The subcategory ‘Fear’ is closely related to ‘Social Consequences’, but here, ten comments explicitly mention fear—such as fear of societal shifts to the right or, more specifically, apprehension about lecturers at the university. Other reasons for not specifying pronouns are provided in two additional subcategories. Eight participants mention that they have not yet decided which pronouns they wish to use for themselves, or that they prefer not to commit to fixed pronouns. Seven individuals indicate that they do not have any preferred pronouns, although no further explanation is provided. Four participants justify their decision not to specify their pronouns based on workplace requirements, team norms, or negative attitudes from superiors. Another four express a desire to specify their pronouns but feel that such practices are too infrequent at the university to feel confident or comfortable doing so. Two participants point out that there are no or were no specific guidelines on this matter from the university or the university institution. Finally, one person simply does not specify their pronouns out of habit.

Overall, the comments in this main category show a wider range of reasons for not sharing pronouns, reflecting different attitudes. They span from beliefs in gender ambiguity and personal indifference to fears of social repercussions.

### 3.4 Usage

The main category ‘Usage’ encompasses 348 direct specifications of pronouns (see 3.4.1 and 3.4.2), as well as descriptions on a meta-level and comments on usage practices more generally. Thirty-six participants detail the form of pronouns and their placement, or provide an abstract description, such as “In Klammern: Name (sie/ihr)” (‘In brackets: Name (sie/ihr)’) or “Mein Name (pronomen)” (‘My name (pronouns)’). Further comments refer to variations in specifying pronouns depending on different factors. In thirty cases, context is emphasized as the determining factor: “Mache ich nur im internationalen Kontext” (‘I only do this in an international context’). Twenty-three participants mention additional restrictions, such as communication medium, people, contact type, or time: “Beim ersten Kontakt mit neuen

Personen.” (‘On first contact with new people.’) or “In meinem Zoom-Namen führe ich die Pronomen auf.” (‘I list the pronouns in my Zoom name.’). Eight individuals note that they include pronouns in their signatures in English, but not in German.<sup>8</sup>

### 3.4.1 Forms

Regarding the form of specifying pronouns among participants, a distinction can be made between short forms and longer formulations. It is important to note that this analysis is based on participants’ self-reported statements and not on actual usage. As such, it cannot be ruled out that some participants may not have answered completely—for example, listing only the pronouns without the surrounding phrases in which they are embedded. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as indicating general trends rather than precise data on actual usage.

For the short forms, there are 205 variants using only brackets, such as (x/x), 44 combinations with names, for example: *Name | FN SN: x/x | (x/x)*, and ten variants feature a preceding addition, such as *Pronouns: x/x*.<sup>9</sup> The longer formulations encompass the explicit specification of pronouns (*My pronoun is/My pronouns are x/x*), followed by different versions of a request to communicate the preferred addressing form or pronouns in German and English, or to use a gender-neutral addressing, as illustrated in table 4. In two cases, an additional note is included indicating that the gender identity of individuals cannot be reliably deduced from their appearance or name.

Table 4: Formulations Specifying Pronouns (including numbers)

Formulation	Number
<i>You are welcome to let me know how I should/can/may address you.   ... how you would like to be addressed.</i>	48
<i>You are welcome to let me know how to address you.   how you would like to be addressed. [originally in English]</i>	9
<i>(Please) feel free to tell me what your preferred pronouns are. [originally in English]</i>	7
<i>Please let me know which pronouns you use.</i>	4
<i>Desire for a gender-neutral form of address: e.g., Please use a neutral form of address.</i>	4

Based solely on this evidence, there appears to be a tendency to request the desired form of address for the person being written to when stating one’s own pronouns—with some variation in the choice of modal verbs. These formulations, although only partially aligned in concrete terms, correspond to the recommendations for gender-neutral language at the University of Hamburg.<sup>10</sup>

### 3.4.2 Pronouns

Table 5 displays the original pronouns provided by survey participants, sorted according to the first pronoun they mentioned.

<sup>8</sup> The category ‘Usage’ contains 445 assigned comments. Although only 442 participants stated that they specified their pronouns in their email signature, three comments could be classified into two categories (see section 2).

<sup>9</sup> It can be assumed that many participants merely filled in the pronouns without specifically listing their names, which are very likely part of their signatures.

<sup>10</sup> The recommendations for gender-neutral language at the University of Hamburg (p. 8) provide an example for specifying pronouns: “Mein Pronomen ist sie/ihr. Gerne können Sie mir mitteilen, wie ich Sie ansprechen soll.” ‘My pronoun is she/her. Please feel free to let me know how I should address you.’

Table 5: Specified Pronouns (including numbers)

<i>sie</i> -based		<i>er</i> -based		no, all or new forms	
Pronouns	Number	Pronouns	Number	Pronouns	Number
<i>sie/ihr</i>	170	<i>er/ihm</i>	23	without pronouns	2
<i>she/her</i>	78	<i>he/him</i>	20	all pronouns	1
<i>sie/she</i>	6	<i>er/ihn</i>	9		
<i>sie</i>	3	<i>er/sein</i>	7	<i>they/them</i>	7
<i>she/they</i>	3	<i>he/his</i>	5	<i>dey/demm</i>	1
<i>sie/ihre</i>	2	<i>er/he</i>	3	<i>dey/deren</i>	1
<i>sie/she/her</i>	2	<i>er/him</i>	2	<i>they/she</i>	1
<i>ihr/sie</i>	1	<i>he/they</i>	2	<i>des/sie</i>	1
<i>sie/dey</i>	1	<i>er</i>	1	<i>dey/denen</i>	1
<i>she/elle</i>	1	<i>er/ihm/ihn</i>	1		
<i>sie/keine</i>	1	<i>er/dey</i>	1		
<i>sie bzw. she</i>	1	<i>er/they</i>	1		
<i>Sie</i>	1				
<i>she/her/none</i>	1				

The table shows that most participants use *sie*-based pronouns in their signatures.<sup>11</sup> Among these, the variant *sie/ihr* clearly dominates with 170 occurrences, followed by the English equivalent *she/her* with 78 occurrences. There are also a few other combinations, including some with new pronouns (e.g., *sie/ihre* or *sie/elle*). Among the *er*-based pronouns, several more frequent variants appear: *er/ihm* (23), *er/ihn* (9), and *er/sein* (7). Here, too, English variants are mentioned relatively often: *he/him* (20), and *he/his* (5), along with less frequent forms like *er/him* or *er/dey*. Only one of the participants uses *all pronouns* in their signature, while two individuals indicate *no pronouns*. Additionally, twelve participants list new or neopronouns, predominantly the English singular *they* and the German neopronoun *dey* (a Germanized form of *they*) with their corresponding inflected forms. The numbers should be viewed in relation to the composition of the participants, even if there is no direct correlation.

The diversity of the results shows that the combinations do not seem to be limited. The differences between the *sie*- and *er*-based pronouns can be related to grammatical characteristics. For the *sie*-based pronouns, *sie/ihr* clearly dominates. *Sie* is to be regarded as the nominative form of the personal pronoun—the accusative form appears to be excluded due to the homonymous form *sie*. The form *ihr* is ambiguous; it can be interpreted as the dative form of the personal pronoun or as the nominative form of the possessive pronoun of *sie*, when referring to a masculine or neuter noun (e.g., *ihr Hut*<sub>MASK</sub> ‘her hat’ or *ihr Auto*<sub>NEUT</sub> ‘her car’). In contrast, inflections of *er* do not exhibit homonymy. Besides the nominative form of the personal pronoun *er*, the following forms also appear: the dative *ihm* (23), the accusative *ihn*

<sup>11</sup> I am referring here to *sie*- and *er*-based pronouns, as opposed to the usual grammatical designations *feminine* and *masculine*, in order to highlight that some of the combinations go beyond this binary classification (see also footnote 1).

(9), and the nominative form of the possessive pronoun *sein* (7), referring to a masculine or neuter noun.

This indicates that, owing to ambiguity due to homonymous forms (*sie*, which can be nominative or accusative), there is less variation in *sie*-based forms. The second component of the main form (*sie/ihr*) is again ambiguous—as either the dative or the possessive nominative—preventing the identification of any consistent pattern. Both readings occur as counterparts in the *er*-based variants: *er/ihm* and *er/sein*. This recent lack of clarity is, thus, evident in the variation observed among the *er*-based forms.

To the best of my knowledge, there are no empirical studies on this topic for English. However, it is often noted that personal pronouns are usually specified in the nominative and accusative forms (King & Crowley, 2023, p. 80)—whereas, in contrast to German, English has only one object form for personal pronouns. It is likely, though this requires further verification, that the practice of specifying pronouns has been imported into the German-speaking world from English. Nevertheless, due to the grammatical differences between the two languages, English can only serve as a limited point of reference. The findings presented here suggest that, within the specific German pronominal system, the forms of the specified pronouns are still under negotiation as this new linguistic practice is being established.

#### 4. Discussion

The evaluations revealed that only a small proportion (12%) of participants at the University of Hamburg specify their pronouns in their email signature. While the majority of those who specify pronouns identify as female in absolute terms, a higher relative proportion of individuals who don't identify as binary include their pronoun compared to other groups.

The use of pronouns in signatures was examined based on the participants' self-report. The analysis reveals notable variation. The specification as such can depend on factors such as context, contact type, communication medium, or the language. In the formulations, usual norms appear to develop, involving specifying pronouns in brackets (*x/x*) or the phrase *My pronouns are x/x* accompanied by a request to provide the desired address.

The specific pronouns indicated in the survey should be understood within the context of the participants' composition (see above). The least frequently employed options include *all/no pronouns*, new and neopronouns (such as *they* and *dey*), followed by *er*-based variants (*er/ihm*, *er/ihn*, *er/sein*) and most commonly *sie*-based variants, with a clear dominance of the form *sie/ihr*. These forms and combinations are related to the German pronominal system, which includes ambiguous forms for *sie*-based pronouns. The variety and patterns suggest an ongoing negotiation process of these forms as part of a larger linguistic change of the German language.

In the discourse surrounding this linguistic practice, which emerges in the commentaries, linguistic arguments play a subordinate role. Instead, various different reasons are provided and discussed for choosing not to use or to reject the practice, revealing participants' differing attitudes and stances. It is evident that some participants abstain from sharing pronouns despite holding a positive attitude towards specifying pronouns or expressing a desire to do so because they are afraid or worried about social consequences (see also Brown, 2024, p. 250). In addition, some participants avoid specifying pronouns either because no decision has been made regarding their pronouns or because they reject fixed pronouns in general.

The concept of a (strict) gender binary plays a central role in the comments within both the rejection and non-usage category. This is reflected either in the fact that participants perceive names as clearly gender-specific, rendering the inclusion of pronouns unnecessary in their

view<sup>12</sup>, or that they dismiss the entire topic as absurd due to this supposed gender binary. These attitudes must be seen within the broader context of the historically entrenched and hegemonic gender binary (Butler, 1990). In this context, Zimman describes the fear of many (cis) people “not knowing whether to refer to them as she or he. This fear is driven by the ideology that there are two sexes, which are naturally distinct, objectively identifiable, and non-overlapping and that these sexes correspond with gender roles” (Zimman, 2019, p. 160). Hence, pronouns in general, along with pronoun specifications and alternatives to the binary *she* and *he* become expressions of threats to this supposed gender binary (see also McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2018, p. 240). These concerns and potential threats then form the basis for rejection or non-usage, as reflected in the comments.

This also appears to be a significant factor underlying the partly vehement rejection expressed in numerous comments. This rejection must be contextualized within the broader, long-lasting polarization of the debate on gender-neutral language in Germany (Meuleneers, 2024). In some comments, pronoun specifications are equated with the use of gender-neutral language (“Das Gendern ist unnötig”, ‘Gendering is unnecessary’), and the practices are perceived as reflecting certain socio-political attitudes. Brown (2024, p. 248) depicts these as “indexical links to broader notions of being ‘sociopolitically progressive’.”

Due to their potential for indexicality (Zimman, 2019; Brown 2024), pronouns and their specification appear to be one primary focus of debates, alongside specific characters in German such as the gender star (\*) and the gender colon (:). These elements seem to serve as materializations of (non-binary) gender notions, which are met with evident resistance. This resistance is often articulated through a rejection of the linguistic practices involved, as reflected in many comments. King and Crowley (2023, p. 82) also describe a polarization and politicization of pronouns. It is also important to emphasize that many participants on the ‘other’ side specify their pronouns, support such practices, want to implement it, or are open to doing so.

Overall, the comments reveal that many people have not yet engaged with the topic and that there is a considerable amount of ignorance. There appears to be little knowledge about pronouns and their specification, both from a grammatical perspective (e.g., the function and usage of pronouns) and a socio-pragmatic perspective (e.g., the function and usage of pronoun specification). Furthermore, the understanding of the connections between pronouns and gender remains limited. This often manifests in the mistaken belief that a person’s gender self-determination can be automatically inferred from their name or appearance, or other cues, or in the assumption that only non-binary people should indicate pronouns.

These findings pertain solely to the available data. They are neither representative nor were they collected through more than one systematic question. However, precisely this type of data collection has facilitated valuable analyses and insights. The results should be regarded as indicative trends and initial observations, serving as a starting point for further, more comprehensive research.

## 5. Conclusion

The present study presented in this article is based on data from an online survey and yielded initial results on practices specifying pronouns and the discourse surrounding them, including

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<sup>12</sup> The significance of names in participants’ arguments is based on the ability of first names to convey gender. They can even be described as ‘tertiary sexual characteristics’ (Kotthoff & Nübling, 2024, p. 226).

underlying attitudes, in German using the example of the University of Hamburg. What conclusions can be drawn from these findings?

Among the survey participants, there are also many binary people who specify their pronouns. This practice is important because, as Brown (2024, p. 254-255) notes “[w]hen only trans folk state their pronouns, this inequality is reinforced, in that cis speakers’ genders are perceived to be ‘natural’ while those of trans speakers are not.” At the same time, it is evident that much work remains to be done—assuming the specification of pronouns is supported, as the university’s recommendations suggest (and I personally endorse). This is especially important if individual participants are genuinely afraid of specifying their pronouns.

In many cases, participants have limited knowledge about pronouns and their specifications. Often, with reference to the binary understanding and perceived unambiguity of gender, they assume that pronoun specifications only apply to non-binary people. But, in contrast, „listing pronouns is a tool to normalize the fact that all people have pronouns that they want others to use in reference to them” (King & Crowley, 2023, p. 81). Furthermore, pronoun specification “effectively interrupts and redirects the normative pronoun and gender assignment process [..., and] facilitate[s] trans speakers’ use of pronouns” (Brown, 2024, p. 248). This forms a crucial starting point—not only for the university, but also for other organizations and the society as a whole: in addition to recommending the specification of pronouns, we should also explain what this entails and why it is beneficial and/or necessary. In the absence of official language policy measures, providing well-founded explanations appears to be even more important.

Concrete steps can be derived from these initial findings, such as providing evidence-based recommendations for pronoun specifications or, most importantly, explaining the background and functions of these specifications. However, as the results are preliminary, they must be completed by further research—for instance, concerning the various forms and combination of specified pronouns or concerning the various forms and functions of pronoun references within organizational communication.

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## Appendix

### Category System

<b>Rejection</b>		
Without Justification	WJ	Fundamental rejection and aversion to the topic in the narrower and broader sense, sometimes with insults and clear expressions of displeasure
Justification: Unnecessity	JU	Rejection, as PS is considered unnecessary and superfluous
Linguistic-Communicative Justification	LC	Rejection with reference to linguistic standardization (spelling, grammar), possible misunderstandings (confusion of forms) and complication of communication (e.g. messy emails)
Justification: Gender Emphasis	JGE	Rejection due to (too great) emphasis on gender, conservative and partly postmodern views
Justification: Encroachment	JE	Rejection, as PS is perceived as encroaching and dictating for others
Justification: Biological Gender Binary	JBG	Rejection with reference to unambiguous biological gender binary or (biological) sex
Justification: Binary Unambiguity	JBU	Rejection due to unambiguous (binary) gender identification
Political Justification	PJ	Rejection because PS is seen as part of "identity politics" or simply political or from the perspective of a "traditional" feminist perspective
Justification: Intimacy	JIN	Rejection, as the (own) pronouns are nobody's business
No Understanding	NU	Rejection because PS and the concept behind it are not understood
Justification: Minority	JM	Rejection, since it only affects a minority

<b>Non-Usage</b>		
Justification: Unambiguous Name	JUN	Justification by an unambiguously gender-specific name, title or job title
Justification: (Personal) Irrelevance	JPI	Justification, as it does not matter to the individual, the persons do not care, they see no reason for themselves
Justification: Possible Social Consequences	JPS	Justification by possible social consequences such as ridiculousness, unpopularity, division, outing
With Tolerance	WT	Justification that people don't do it themselves, but everyone must decide for themselves, and it doesn't bother them (some statements also in UC (Personal) Irrelevance)
Justification: Fear	JF	Justification similar to possible social consequences, but here explicit mention of fear
Justification: Indecision/No Decision	JID	Justification by not wanting to decide or not yet having decided which pronouns to use
Justification: No Preferences	JNP	Justification by the fact that there are no preferred pronouns

Justification: Superiors	JS	Justification due to job requirements or due to prohibition or negative attitude of superiors
Justification: Rarity	JR	Justification that it is done too rarely to do it oneself
Justification: Guidelines	JG	Justification by the fact that there are no guidelines or the topic is/was not included
Justification: Habit	JH	

<b>Usage</b>		
Form & Placement	FP	Description of the form and/or placement or abstract specification
Context	C	Comment on the contexts in which PS is used and in which it is not [since pronouns are partly shared > in this category]
Restrictions	R	Comment on variation of usage [restriction] in relation to medium, persons, contact or time
Language	L	Comment on usage depending on the language

<b>Agreement</b>		
Intention	I	General and concrete expression/ declaration of the intention to implement this
Justification in Case of Ambiguity	JCA	Expression of agreement/approval in ambiguous cases (e.g., non-binary persons, names)
Without Comment	WC	Expression of positive attitude/agreement without further comments
Relevance	RV	

<b>Others</b>		
No Signature	NS	Indication that participant has no signature (applies to students)
No Involvement	NI	Comment that participants have never thought about/dealt with PS before
Address	A	Comment that gender-neutral form of address is used or that pronouns are evident from the form of address
Question not Understood	QN	Comment that the question was not understood
Desire for Information	DI	Comment that more information about PS is desired