Rewriting Language

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It’s good to make people realise … double standards

Evaluating the impact of literary texts thematising sex/gender and language

To test how other readers perceive the effectiveness of the three literary approaches, I conducted a focus group study. I asked participants to respond to an excerpt from Ursula K. Le Guin’s The Left Hand of Darkness, June Arnold’s The Cook and the Carpenter and Gerd Brantenberg’s Egalias døtre in either English or German. The resulting data allows me to gauge the texts’ impact, and explore whether and how they might be a useful tool to sensitise readers to the importance of inclusive language.

Methodology

Focus groups as a dialogic tool

As Sue Wilkinson explains in ‘Focus Groups: A Feminist Method’, ‘[f]ocus groups … draw on people’s normal, everyday experiences of talking and arguing’ and thereby ‘[t]ap into] this ordinary social process’ (Wilkinson 1999a, 225). While the context remains created by the researcher, ‘the interactions that take place within focus groups are closer to everyday social processes than those afforded by most other research methods’ (Wilkinson 1999a, 227). However, the very communality of focus groups can create complications. Martha Ann Carey, for example, warns in ‘The Group Effect in Focus Groups: Planning, Implementing, and Interpreting Focus Group Research’ that ‘a person [might] elect … to tailor his or her contributions to be in line with perceptions of the group members’ (Carey 1994, 236). Further, as Sue Wilkinson highlights in ‘Focus Groups
in Feminist Research: Power, Interaction, and the Co-construction of Meaning’, in addition to individuals silencing themselves, they might also be silenced by others. She argues that ‘group participants can collaborate and collude effectively to intimidate and/or silence a particular member’ (Wilkinson 1998, 116). A third type of silencing, or censoring, can occur when group members ‘create a silence around a particular topic or issue’ (Wilkinson 1998, 116); a fourth is conformity with the presumed views of the researcher. As Terrance L. Albrecht, Gerianne M. Johnson and Joseph B. Walther confirm in ‘Understanding Communication Processes in Focus Groups’, ‘responses may reflect what it is they [participants] think the facilitator wants to hear’ (Albrecht et al. 1993, 55). These need to be considered to ensure a fruitful discussion.

Two additional factors to consider are status and diversity. As Kitzinger and Barbour argue in ‘Introduction: The Challenge and Promise of Focus Groups’, ‘hierarchies within groups and in broader society may inhibit the contributions of members’ (Kitzinger and Barbour 1999, 9). And while Michael Bloor, Jane Frankland, Michelle Thomas and Kate Robson reflect in Focus Groups in Social Research that ‘[t]here has to be sufficient diversity to encourage discussion’, if a group is too diverse ‘conflict and the repression of views of certain individuals’ may arise (Bloor et al. 2001, 20). Participants’ sex/gender can be a particularly salient factor for this. As Richard A. Krueger states in Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research, ‘[a]t times, it is unwise to mix gender in focus groups, particularly if the topic of discussion is experienced differently by each sex’ (Krueger 1994, 78). The author elaborates: ‘[m]en may have a tendency to speak more frequently and with more authority when in groups with women – sometimes called the “peacock effect”’ (Krueger 1994, 78). This can silence female group members as well as be ‘an irritant’ to them (Krueger 1994, 78). On the other hand, mixed groups ‘better reflect the structure of the society and thus allow … the participants and researcher to learn about social differences and social relationships’ (Goss and Leinbach 1996, 119), Jon D. Goss and Thomas R. Leinbach highlight in ‘Focus Groups as Alternative Research Practice: Experience with Transmigrants in Indonesia’. Mixed groups in terms of sex/gender, in particular, the authors reflect, ‘work … to reveal to participants the gender-differentiated nature of social knowledge and the distinctive experiences and perspectives of men and women’ (Goss and Leinbach 1996, 119). That is, mixed groups can provide new insights to both sexes/genders.

Sex/gender comes into play not only between participants but also between the researcher and respondents. As Karen Taylor comments in ‘Keeping Mum: The Paradoxes of Gendered Power Relations in
Interviewing’, women interviewing men can equally cause complications. ‘As a dominant group the men resist traditional research power dynamics of the researcher/researched’ (Taylor 1996, 116), she states. Disruptions to the research process might consist of relatively ‘harmless’ non-compliance, but might also include defiance and aggression. Additionally, the position of a female researcher will have an impact on the group dynamic. As Maria Mies reflects in ‘Towards a Methodology for Feminist Research’, ‘their own existence as women and scholars is a contradictory one. As women, they are affected by sexist oppression together with other women, and as scholars they share the privileges of the (male) academic elite’ (Mies 1983, 120, emphasis in original). So while female facilitators and participants might be able to co-operate on the basis of sex/gender, it does not necessarily prevent misunderstanding. As Catherine Kohler Riessman found in ‘When Gender is Not Enough: Women Interviewing Women’, ‘the lack of shared cultural and class assumptions’ (Riessman 1987, 190) can also impede the research process.

A key benefit of focus groups is that they help to level the usual research hierarchy to a large degree. ‘[They] are a relatively non-hierarchical method’, Wilkinson explains in ‘How Useful Are Focus Groups in Feminist Research?’, ‘they shift the balance of power away from the researcher towards the research participants’ (Wilkinson 1999b, 64, emphasis in original). Esther Madriz agrees, and elaborates in ‘Focus Groups in Feminist Research’ that ‘more weight [is given] to the participants’ opinions, decreasing the influence the researcher has over the interview process’ due to ‘the interaction among group participants’ (Madriz 2000, 836–7). Goss and Leinbach also propose that ‘both the researcher and the research subjects may simultaneously obtain insights and understanding of [a] particular social situation during the process of research’ (Goss and Leinbach 1996, 116–17, emphasis in original). This allows both parties to benefit. Focus groups are ‘dialogic’, as the authors term it, not just in terms of participants’ interaction but also the facilitator’s understanding (Goss and Leinbach 1996, 118, emphasis in original). This dialogic aspect of focus groups can be enhanced further by encouraging participants to develop their own viewpoints as much as possible. One way to do so is by ‘beginning [the focus group] with participants writing, rather than saying, their ideas’ (Albrecht et al. 1993, 57). This allows the researcher to access ‘internalized opinions’ (Albrecht et al. 1993, 57), which limits conformity both with what the researcher ‘wants to hear’ and the opinions of other group members.

In effect, the introduction of reflective tasks can circumvent many of the concerns around focus groups from the beginning. As my study
was focused on the impact of literary texts on readers’ perceptions of the importance of inclusive language, participants were provided with excerpts from three of the literary texts I evaluated and asked to take notes prior to our discussion. This helped to maximise the dialogic potential of the focus groups.

Grounded theory as reflective methodology

Developed by Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss and first published in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, ‘grounded theory is derived from data and then illustrated by characteristic examples of data’ (Glaser and Strauss 1968, 5). Additionally, according to the authors, ‘[o]ur strategy of comparative analysis for generating theory puts a high emphasis on *theory as process*; that is, theory as an ever-developing entity, not as a perfected product’ (Glaser and Strauss 1968, 32, emphasis in original). This means data is not only constantly compared but also any theory emerging from this comparison is subject to alteration. This puts participants’ responses at the heart of the analysis – what matters most to them also matters most in the analytic process. Linking in with the dialogic potential of the focus group method, grounded theory was highly suited to assess reader responses.

While Glaser and Strauss developed the original methodology, I chose to work with Kathy Charmaz’s *Constructing Grounded Theory*. Glaser and Strauss’s thinking originated in the late 1960s, a time perhaps when qualitative research was measured even more strongly against the standards of positivist science. In consequence, the authors did not reflect in-depth on the researcher as a central participant in the research process. By proposing a ‘constructivist approach perspective’ that ‘shreds notions of a neutral observer and value-free expert’ (Charmaz 2014, 13), Charmaz proposes the (re)integration of the researcher who ‘must examine rather than erase how their privileges and preconceptions may shape the analysis’ (Charmaz 2014, 13). This approach takes concerns around the status of the researcher into account, which is also a central feature of a considered focus group study. As a result, grounded theory, and Charmaz’s reflective approach in particular, complements the creation of a non-hierarchical research environment. As Charmaz elaborates in “Discovering” Chronic Illness: Using Grounded Theory’, ‘[t]he “groundedness” of this approach fundamentally results from these researchers’ commitment to analyze what they actually observe in the field or in their data’ instead of ‘limit[ing] themselves to preconceived hypotheses … [or] follow[ing] the prescribed canons of traditional
random sampling’ (Charmaz 1990, 1162). Analysts are guided by the data and the findings that emerge from it, which means that ‘rather than focusing time and energy on investigating a preconceived, researcher-driven problem or process that is of little concern to the participants, this openness enables the researcher to be more responsive to the participants’ problem’ (Cutcliffe 2005, 423), John R. Cutcliffe adds in ‘Adapt or Adopt: Developing and Transgressing the Methodological Boundaries of Grounded Theory’.

To get to the core of ‘the participants’ problem’, as Cutcliffe terms it, grounded theory employs a variety of methods. The first step of analysis is the coding of data, which has an ‘initial’ and a ‘focused’ stage, according to Charmaz. She explains that ‘[d]uring initial coding, the goal is to remain open to all possible theoretical directions’ (Charmaz 2014, 114) while ‘[f]ocused codes advance the theoretical direction of your work’ (Charmaz 2014, 138). In the beginning, then, researchers consider all possible interpretations. This openness allows them to listen to what participants are actually saying, which interlinks with the explorative aims of my focus group study. The subsequent move from initial codes to focused codes is supported by the ‘constant comparative methods’ (Charmaz 2014, 132), and focused coding enables ‘concentrating on what your initial codes say and the comparisons you make with and between them’ (Charmaz 2014, 140). By comparing ‘data and data, data and codes, codes and codes’ and the emergent ‘categories and categories’ (Charmaz 2014, 171), researchers slowly arrive at the beginnings of a theory. This is tested against further data: ‘theoretical sampling’, as this part of the process is called, ‘means seeking and collecting pertinent data to elaborate and refine categories in your emerging theory’ (Charmaz 2014, 192). It essentially allows the analyst to test categories and with them the theory. And rather than traditional demographic sampling, ‘theoretical sampling pertains only to conceptual and theoretical development of your analysis; it is not about representing a population’ (Charmaz 2014, 198, emphasis in original). Its function is therefore to progress the emerging theory.

Coding and theoretical sampling are not the only core components of grounded theory. Memo-writing is arguably the practice that allows codes to evolve and a theory to emerge in the first place. As Charmaz explains, ‘[m]emos catch your thoughts, capture the comparisons and connections you make, and crystallize questions and directions for you to pursue’ (Charmaz 2014, 162). In short, memo-writing ‘provides a space to become actively engaged in your materials, to develop your ideas, to fine-tune your subsequent data-gathering, and to engage in critical
reflexivity’ (Charmaz 2014, 162–3). But in order to be effective, reflexivity must incorporate several components, as Virginia L. Olesen highlights in ‘Feminist Qualitative Research and Grounded Theory: Complexities, Criticisms, and Opportunities’. These are: ‘(1) Full explanation of how analytic and practical issues were handled; (2) Examination of the researcher’s own background and its influences on the research; and (3) Reflections on the researcher’s own emotions, worries, feelings’ (Olesen 2010, 423). Some might argue that this level of personal involvement impedes the research process; however, working under the assumption, or even pretence, of objectivity seems much more damaging. One way of looking at the integration of reflexivity is as ‘provid[ing] a way for readers to assess the researcher in action and accord trustworthiness and credibility’ (Olesen 2010, 428). In fact, reflexivity enables the reader to consider the researcher, along with the participants, as an agent in the research process. And this understanding encourages the levelling of any findings from ‘the’ truth to ‘a’ truth, which helps to deflate the hierarchy of researcher and researched in the analytic process. Grounded theory therefore goes hand in hand with the dialogic potential of the focus group method.

Research design

The design of my topic guide was heavily influenced by Richard A. Krueger’s Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research and Lia Litosseliti’s Using Focus Groups in Research. Both authors give valuable advice on how to conduct focus groups, including how to make participants feel at ease, how to structure the discussion and what type of questions to ask. After deciding whom to approach to take part, choosing the ideal group size was the next step in enabling a fruitful discussion. As Litosseliti states, ‘[f]ocus groups typically consist of between six and ten participants, but the size can range from as few as four … to as many as twelve’ (Litosseliti 2007, 3). While ‘[l]arger groups are difficult to manage, moderate and analyse’, she explains, they ‘can be useful for brainstorming’ (Litosseliti 2007, 3). ‘Smaller groups’, on the other hand, ‘are more appropriate if the aim is to explore complex, controversial, emotional topics, or to encourage detailed accounts’ (Litosseliti 2007, 3). According to Litosseliti, smaller groups ‘offer more opportunity for people to talk and are more practical to set up and manage’ (Litosseliti 2007, 3). Krueger agrees: ‘[s]mall groups of 4 or 5 participants’, he adds, ‘afford more opportunity to share ideas’ (Krueger 1994, 17). Such ‘mini-focus groups’ (Krueger 1994, 17, emphasis in original), as Krueger terms them, were most
appropriate for the purposes of my study. As respondents were asked to share their opinions and ideas on three literary excerpts, I wanted to ensure there was sufficient opportunity for everyone to fully participate. Furthermore, the issue of sex/gender and language is potentially considered a sensitive or controversial topic, making smaller groups more suitable to discuss it. Another factor to consider was the number of focus groups. As Litosseliti comments, ‘[i]t is too risky to build a research project around a single focus group’ as this ‘could hinder both comparative and in-depth exploration of the topic’ (Litosseliti 2007, 4). In order to access rich and comparable data, I followed Litosseliti’s advice that ‘[a] typical number is between four and six groups’ (Litosseliti 2007, 4). I conducted a pilot focus group to test my guide and materials, as well as two native English- and two native German-speaking groups. In sum, I conducted five groups.

Based on Krueger’s recommendations I developed the following structure for my topic guide. This remained the same throughout my study, bar one or two adjustments after the pilot focus group meeting. As a preamble to the discussion, I welcomed the participants, stated why the focus group was taking place and clarified how the data would be used. I explained that all responses would be equally valid and that participants were not meant to reach a consensus. I then asked the respondents to introduce themselves and say briefly why they were interested in taking part. Following this introduction, I handed out reading packs – in either English or German – which contained the introductory pages of three of the literary texts I evaluated\(^2\). These were *The Left Hand of Darkness* (Le Guin 1991, 1–4), *The Cook and the Carpenter* (Arnold 1973, 3–6), and *The Daughters of Egalia* (Brantenberg 1985, 9–12) for the English groups, and *Winterplanet* (Le Guin 1981, 5–9), my own translation of *The Cook and the Carpenter* (Arnold 1973, 3–6) and *Die Töchter Egalias* (Brantenberg 1987, 7–10) for the German groups. I instructed participants to underline anything they noticed about the language employed in the excerpts and to write a few bullet points or sentences on their impressions on a separate piece of paper. I asked respondents to pay particular attention to the use of nouns, for example job titles such as ‘doctor’, and pronouns, such as ‘she’ or ‘he’. Participants were given about 25 minutes to complete the task; I extended the reading and writing time in each group as and when required.

Respondents’ perceptions of the three excerpts were elicited with the help of general explorative questions. First, we discussed the excerpt from *The Left Hand of Darkness* by sharing what each participant noticed about the language used in the text. I wrote down key points and used
these to prompt a more in-depth discussion. This remained the same throughout the study; for example, I asked respondents to reflect on whom they imagined when reading the text and to elaborate on why this was the case. After all opinions had been exhausted, I moved the group on to the second excerpt, *The Cook and the Carpenter*, and asked participants to share what they noticed. I also instructed them to consider the similarities and differences between the two texts. In the German groups, I additionally referred to the outcomes of previous groups whenever useful to further probe certain comments. Finally, we explored respondents’ thoughts in relation to *The Daughters of Egalia*. I asked participants to put their bullet points on the text’s language use onto a whiteboard and read what the others had written. We then reconvened to explore what respondents had noticed and discussed how all three excerpts compared. I was particularly interested in what participants considered the goal of each excerpt and how effective the texts were in meeting it. I also asked which of the three excerpts participants found most effective in highlighting the issue of linguistic representation.

The discussion was concluded by a brief summary during which I listed the key points of our exploration. I asked the participants if this was a fair reflection and provided space to make any other comments. I then formally concluded by thanking them for their participation, reiterated how the data would be used and confirmed that their contributions were anonymous. I handed out an information sheet with my details and contacted them by email a few days later to offer another opportunity for comments and feedback. Following on, I transcribed the responses and analysed the data with grounded theory.

**Focus group analysis**

In this section I assess the data resulting from the focus group discussions. I explore how codes and categories emerged from participants’ responses, and how grounded theory evolved in consequence.

**Emerging codes and categories – pilot**

The aim of the pilot focus group was to test my topic guide and materials. I recruited participants by approaching other students, and three respondents agreed to take part in this initial meeting. All participants, Claudia, Janine and Martina, were of white European ethnicity, female, on average 32 years old and non-native English speakers. Two
participants I knew well and the third I had met several times before. The same two participants were also familiar with one another; the third was relatively new to the group. All, however, had previously encountered each other in a conference setting. Motivations to take part therefore reflected this pre-existing connection. While one respondent commented that ‘I am here because of my interest, I suppose, in language and gender’, the other two reflected, ‘I’m here because you asked me to come’ and ‘I’m here because you need some help for your focus group.’

After transcribing the pilot focus group, I evaluated the data by reading closely and coding line by line. I selected line-by-line coding as, according to Charmaz, ‘[it] encourages you to see otherwise undetected patterns’ (Charmaz 2014, 125) and ‘frees you from becoming so immersed in your research participants’ world-views that you accept them without question’ (Charmaz 2014, 127). Charmaz advises, ‘to remain open to all possible theoretical directions’ (Charmaz 2014, 114), I therefore chose ‘in vivo codes’ – using a word or phrase from the data – at this stage as they allow ‘to preserve participants’ meanings of their views and actions in the coding’ (Charmaz 2014, 134, emphasis in original). This ensured that I stayed close to what was said. While coding, I also wrote memos to reflect on emerging patterns, and as the following example shows these were mainly summaries to begin with. A line-by-line evaluation of the first comment on The Left Hand of Darkness looks as follows: first, Janine began by saying that ‘[o]kay, so I don’t know if it’s what you wanted or not’, which I coded as ‘unsure if “got” the task’. She then stated, ‘so yeah, the narrator usually uses “I”’, which was coded as ‘focus on “I” in first comment’. Janine continued by explaining, ‘so you don’t, he or she doesn’t really, like, specify if we’re talking about a male or a female’, coded as ‘“I” female or male?’. The final two lines, ‘so I came to the conclusion that with the rest of the text because it’s only talking about men and kings and everything’ and ‘that we’re talking only about men here’, were coded as ‘only men referred to, so only men’. The corresponding memo states, ‘the participant mentions the use of “I” by the narrator – but is unsure if that is what I was looking for; she at first can’t tell whether the narrator is male or female. However, the respondent assumed that the narrator has to be male as the text only talks about men.’

As is visible from my response to these five lines my initial analysis stayed very close to the transcript. Further, as is equally clear, I struggled with what is one of the key recommendations by Charmaz: ‘[c]oding for actions’ (Charmaz 2014, 116) or ‘coding with gerunds’ (Charmaz 2014, 121). Charmaz instructs, ‘[a]ttempt to code with words that reflect action … [as it] reduces tendencies to code for types of people’ (Charmaz 2014, 121).
‘[C]oding for actions’, she adds, ‘curbs our tendencies to make conceptual leaps and to adopt extant theories before we have done the necessary analytic work’ (Charmaz 2014, 117, emphasis in original).

This proved easier said than done, as my default was to summarise in statements rather than in actions and perceptions. But as codes began to condense into themes, I began to apply gerund-coding – with verbs ending in ‘ing’ – more thoroughly.

Theme codes that emerged from the first half of the transcript included ‘imagining men only’, ‘feeling frustrated/confused’ and ‘seeing women only in the specific’. A few examples help to illustrate how these codes came into being. For example, ‘imagining men only’ and ‘seeing women only in the specific’ stemmed from comments on the impact of language on the ability to imagine characters. In relation to The Left Hand of Darkness, Claudia reflected as follows: ‘the only time when a woman is specified is to illustrate a metaphor about beauty.’ The use of ‘only time’ and ‘specified’ highlight that, to the mind of the respondent, women are linguistically and conceptually excluded from the text, except ‘to illustrate … beauty’. She continued, ‘if you follow conventions you picture just men’, supporting her previous statement that women are visible only in the ‘specific’. Claudia’s reference to ‘conventions’ is striking in this instance. For example, what type of conventions led her to picture only men? Are these linguistically or contextually informed, or perhaps both? Her subsequent comment gives some explanation: ‘I think people will have to consciously make themselves picture a female ambassador because that’s just not [inaudible] how it is.’ Subsequently, the two theme codes emerged from the data, and further, they were linked. The linguistic and/or conceptual exclusion of women creates the impression that the text is portraying ‘just men’.

The third code, ‘feeling frustrated/confused’, arose from another key theme in participants’ responses, and was mainly, but not exclusively, connected to The Cook and the Carpenter. As Martina reflected on her reaction to the text, ‘the second text really frustrated me’ and ‘I just got so confused’. The audible emphasis on ‘really’ and ‘so’ highlights the force of her response – an experience connected to the neutral pronoun ‘na’. She stated, ‘as much as I want to believe in the fact that we can actually use a gender-neutral pronoun to refer to people and etc. etc. I got so confused at some point that I stopped reading it.’ This perception proved central also for the other participants and therefore resulted in the code above.

Additional codes that emerged from the data were: ‘making people think’, ‘considering feasibility of changes’ and ‘linking language and imagination’. Already, connections between these initial theme codes
became visible, which supported the formation of categories later on. ‘Linking language and imagination’ can be employed as an overarching category for ‘imagining men only’ and ‘seeing women only in the specific’, therefore combining three codes into one. ‘Making people think’ and ‘considering feasibility of changes’, however, were unrelated to previous findings. A few examples help to illustrate their formation. In relation to *The Daughters of Egalia*, for example, Martina stated, ‘it’s useful in as far as it kind of makes people realise stereotypes about women and men in our society by reversing them’, which, along with similar comments made by other respondents, led to the emergence of ‘making people think’. The second, ‘considering feasibility of changes’, stemmed from reflections such as, ‘but are we ready to get rid of pronouns completely, I’m not sure in language use.’ All of the above are of course not exhaustive and only marked the first step of moving away from *in vivo* coding to more analytic perspectives. It took a second close reading of my initially coded material to test these initial findings and see patterns emerge. Structural codes aside, which describe the respondents and their environment, eight theme codes crystallised from the data. These evolved from the above emerging codes and developed into 1. ‘linking language and imagination’, 2. ‘linking language and reality’, 3. ‘reflecting on the relation between texts’, 4. ‘reflecting on the effectiveness of texts’, 5. ‘reflecting on the feasibility of changes/proposals’, 6. ‘commenting on the status quo’, 7. ‘misunderstandings’ and 8. ‘getting it’.

Again, a few examples help to illustrate how I arrived at one of these theme codes in particular. To return to the first response to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, even though Janine was uncertain about the sex/gender of the narrator, she felt led to assume her/him to be male. She stated that ‘the rest of the text’ was to her understanding ‘only talking about men and kings’, which seemed to imply ‘that we’re talking only about men here’. The predominantly male language of the excerpt then, according to the participant, created a link between ‘the rest of the text’ and the sex/gender of the narrator. This perceived connection formed the basis for ‘linking language and imagination’ – a code that proved relevant also for other responses. In fact, I applied this code 25 times as either a main or subcode throughout the second close reading.

The next step in my analysis was to refine these eight codes, with comparing and sorting data an essential component. I created a diagram that provided an overview of all the coded data and allowed me to construct links between them. It also enabled me to understand which codes had little supporting evidence and might be better off submerged under an umbrella code, and which were fairly comprehensive and
therefore of key importance for the analysis. From the eight emerging codes above, ‘language’ and ‘effectiveness’ were major themes. Of course, my research design specifically asked participants to consider the language employed in each excerpt as well as its effectiveness in highlighting the linguistic representation of women and men. This is a concern in terms of grounded theory and needs to be addressed at this stage. A key question might be: were these indeed of most interest to respondents, or was their emergence simply preconditioned by my instructions? One could argue either way; however, issues such as these are hard to circumvent for most researchers. As Cutcliffe states, ‘[l]ack of precision in the research question can also cause considerable difficulty for ethics committees’ (Cutcliffe 2005, 424). A completely open exploration is therefore difficult to achieve. Based on the data available, language and effectiveness emerged as key concerns, and adequate categories were therefore required to reflect their centrality, even if their emergence was potentially compromised. Consequently, ‘reflecting on language’ and ‘reflecting on the effectiveness of texts’ emerged as two new cores, with ‘reflecting on language’ now including ‘linking language and imagination’, ‘linking language and reality’ and ‘reflecting on the feasibility of changes/proposals’ as subcategories. A fourth separate subcategory emerged from comments on the use of ‘I’ in *The Left Hand of Darkness* and the neutral pronoun ‘na’ in *The Cook and the Carpenter*. This was termed ‘considering the ambiguous subject’. ‘Reflecting on the effectiveness of texts’, on the other hand, acted as an umbrella for ‘commenting on the status quo’, ‘misunderstandings’ and ‘getting it’. I re-included the theme of ‘frustration/confusion’ under ‘effectiveness’ as it proved to be of central concern – this now incorporated comments on ‘intentionality’ and ‘writing style’. As became clear from the diagram, the code ‘reflecting on the relation between texts’ did not integrate into the core codes. And with only two relevant pieces of data it was eventually discarded.

The categories emerging from the diagram initially complicate the above codes as much as they merge codes into useful categories. However, seeing links between data and codes as well as considering their differences allowed me to progress to the final stage of coding. For example, it enabled me to see a connection between respondents’ comments coded as ‘linking language and imagination’ and ‘frustration/confusion’. Reflections on *The Cook and the Carpenter*, in particular, highlighted participants’ inability to imagine characters. As Janine reflected, ‘I agree with you with the frustrating thing … it’s just because you get lost in all the characters. I couldn’t follow the story, like, who is “Will”? And who is the “cook”? And who is the “carpenter”? And the stranger, is
the stranger the woman?’ Not being able to imagine ‘who is who’ resulted in frustration for respondents and therefore signposted an important connection. The linguistic status quo enables speakers to differentiate between ‘female’ and ‘male’ – a differentiation that the novel fundamentally challenges.

Another example of a link emerging from the diagram is the following comment: ‘I don’t think it’s because they’re using “nan” or “na” or whatever, it’s because all those characters get mixed up in the way that the story is told’, Janine stated, ‘so yeah, the story is really frustrating because you can’t actually understand it.’ The ‘way that the story is told’ signals a reflection on the ‘writing style’ of the text, while the latter half of the statement implies ‘frustration/confusion’. There are many more examples of how links became visible in the diagram; these connections fundamentally shaped my final categories.

The core that emerged from the initial coding of data, the comparison of data and codes, and the collation of codes into categories is ‘reflecting on (sex/gender and) language’. This core category originally included eight subcategories: 1. ‘considering feasibility/reality’, 2. ‘considering the impact of pronouns’, 3. ‘perceiving female-specific images’, 4. ‘perceiving male-specific images’, 5. ‘struggling with the ambiguous subject’, 6. ‘(not) getting it’, 7. ‘reflecting on effectiveness’ and 8. ‘noticing the highlighting of issues’. Focused coding established clearer links, resulting in the condensing to four subcategories: 1. ‘perceiving specific images’, combining ‘perceiving female-specific images’ and ‘perceiving male-specific images’; 2. ‘considering the impact of pronouns’, which includes ‘struggling with the ambiguous subject’; 3. ‘reflecting on effectiveness’, which incorporates ‘noticing the highlighting of issues’ and ‘(not) getting it’; and 4. ‘considering feasibility/reality’. In the following I analyse the data from the native English-speaking focus groups in relation to these subcategories and the data that emerged from the pilot focus group. The aim is to evaluate whether these subcategories remain the most suitable or whether the native English focus group data provides new insights. I thereby put the emerging categories to the test.

Testing emerging categories – native English responses

Respondents were recruited by approaching members of two pre-existing groups: one was a postgraduate discussion group and the other a feminist writing group. I was a member of both groups, which, similar to the pilot focus group, resulted in a pre-connection with participants. Four members of the postgraduate group took part, Sam, Jennie, Rich...
and Sarah, all of whom knew one another from previous discussion group encounters. Two members were newer to the group; the third I had known for over a year and the fourth I knew well. Of the four respondents from the feminist writing group, Jo, Alice, Mandy and Jessica, I knew two relatively well, and the third I knew well. All three had been part of this and another writing group for some time. The fourth participant was new to the group, but a close friend of one of the other members. I chose to work with these networks for two reasons: first, I wanted to be able to access an ‘ordinary social process’, as Wilkinson terms it; and secondly, I intended to level any hierarchy between the researcher and the researched as far as possible. This enabled a dialogic focus group study, while my awareness of the impact of this setting allowed for a reflective analytic practice.

All participants were native English speakers and identified as either white British or white European. The postgraduate group consisted of three female and one male participant with an average age of 26 years, while all respondents from the feminist writing group were female and the average age was 31 years. Prior to the focus group discussions I asked participants to complete a questionnaire, which aimed to assess attitudes toward the issue of sex/gender and language. I decided on ‘The Inventory of Attitudes toward Sexist/Nonsexist Language – General (IASNL-G)’, developed by Janet B. Parks and Mary Ann Roberton (2000, Appendix), to access participants’ responses. The inventory has been thoroughly tested and revised by Parks and Roberton (2000/2001) and also employed by other researchers. Oriane Sarrasin, Ute Gabriel, and Pascal Gygax, for example, used part of the questionnaire in their 2012 study ‘Sexism and Attitudes Toward Gender-Neutral Language: The Case of English, French, and German’. As Sarrasin et al. describe the inventory, it is ‘divided into subscales for beliefs about sexist language, recognition of sexist language, and willingness to use nonsexist language’ (Sarrasin et al. 2012, 117), all of which were useful for the purposes of my study. Further, the IASNL-G is open-access and provided ‘for use by any interested researcher’ (Parks and Roberton 2000, 433). The authors recommend the tool ‘should be used exactly as it appears …, including the presentation of the operational definition of sexist language’ (Parks and Roberton 2000, 433, emphasis in original). I reproduced the questionnaire as advised with the following results.

The respondents from the postgraduate discussion group shared a supportive attitude toward non-sexist language, with an average score of 86. Results were similar for participants from the feminist writing group, who also had a supportive attitude, but, perhaps predictably, with an even
higher average score of 95. According to Parks and Roberton’s inventory, ‘total scores between 73.6 and 105 reflect a supportive attitude’ (Parks and Roberton 2000, 433–4); respondents from both groups therefore scored solidly within that range. Consequently, it could be expected that all participants would have similar viewpoints on the issue of sex/gender and language. In the following section I explore how responses from each group overlap and where they differ. Further, I evaluate how the data from the two native English-speaking focus groups supports or challenges the categories emerging from the pilot focus group. To test the four developing themes, ‘perceiving specific images’, ‘considering the impact of pronouns’, ‘reflecting on effectiveness’ and ‘considering feasibility/reality’, the analysis is given in separate sections. This is not to say that the categories are fixed or self-contained with no potential for crossovers or linkages; but to investigate their validity it was most useful to keep them distinct at this stage.

Perceiving specific images: How language evokes a particular sex/gender

One key category emerging from the pilot focus group was the perception of specific images. Respondents from the pilot as well as the two native English-speaking groups all commented on the understanding of certain terms, and therefore certain characters, as either male or female. This illustrates the relevance of the hypothesis that language influences thought, and more specifically, of Tohidian’s interpretation that language influences perception. However, this association was shaped by the language used in the literary excerpts as much as the context imagined or given. The introductory pages from The Left Hand of Darkness stimulated most reflection and debate, which centred on the assumption that nouns and pronouns with predominantly male associations also predominantly evoke men. In reference to Le Guin’s text, respondents saw a clear link between sex/gender and language, even if sex/gender was not openly given. In fact, several participants initially commented that most terms, in themselves, were not necessarily specific. ‘[T]here are lots of lists of job titles and I thought only one was gender-specific which was “lords”’, Sam from the postgraduate discussion group stated. This was supported by Jennie, who said, ‘yeah professions aren’t gendered.’ However, ‘even though the professions aren’t gendered’, Jennie continued, ‘they’re like traditionally gendered professions.’ This highlights that even when terms are not specific on the surface, their historical usage and meaning impact on readers’ understanding.
‘Convention’ was central to evoking specificity, according to Claudia from the pilot group, a point that was picked up also by native English-speaking respondents. The interpretation of terms such as ‘guards’, ‘functionaries’ and ‘dignitaries’ is inevitably shaped by history and context, leading Sam to reflect, ‘[q]uite honestly with the procession I pictured a medieval procession with this processional order … so in that context everyone would have to be male.’ The impact of convention was also explored in the feminist writing group, where Jessica commented, ‘although a lot of the professions or job titles [inaudible] were non-gender-specific, the context of the piece, which you could see as sort of medieval, sort of defined it.’ She explained, ‘the fact that, you know, the procession of those, were only those who were in the public life and of high rank and in trade’, and added ‘that historical standing would eliminate them [women] from masonry or being a student or an ambassador.’ Jessica continued, ‘I thought it’s kind of because of our knowledge of historical norms that gave us the only, for a while, the only indication of gender.’ Jennie from the postgraduate group explored this further: ‘I think we’re all people that sort of think about gender academically as well so obviously, like, we don’t want to just automatically think of like a “mason” as a man or something but actually you still find I have to make a conscious effort.’ As the respondent remarked, even those who share an interest in sex/gender and language have to make ‘a conscious effort’ to override historical associations. Jennie therefore concluded, ‘I think for most people probably the instant response to the professions and names would be masculine.’

These reflections built on the explorations in the pilot group, where the discussion developed as follows among two participants:

Martina: I was alerted by the fact that we got a ‘king’, we got ‘lords’
Janine: hm
Martina: and then come on, we all know that when people say ‘mayors’ and you know
Janine: yeah and ‘masons’
Martina: ‘guards’ and ‘functionaries’
Janine: yeah
Martina: etc. believe it or not they’re mostly men … no matter what you say

While male images seemed to be readily available in the excerpt from *The Left Hand of Darkness*, women came to mind rarely, if at all. As Sarah from the postgraduate group commented, ‘even things like “deputies”,'
“senators”, “mayors”, though we shouldn’t associate them with just men, and you can have obviously … female “senators”, but I think, yeah we do associate them more with men.’ Linguistically neutral terms are therefore not necessarily perceived as such, leaving the association ‘female’ confined to the specific. ‘[T]he only time when a woman is specified is to illustrate a metaphor about beauty’, Claudia from the pilot group confirmed. This was also commented on by Jo from the feminist writing group: ‘the only time a woman is even referred to is right at the beginning where they talk about the women wearing a jewel … and that was like metaphorically, wasn’t it, not like literally a woman wearing a jewel.’ Rich from the postgraduate group added, ‘as far as I can see there’s no mention, there’s no explicit mention of women’; a similar perception led Claudia to conclude that ‘for me it [the excerpt] was devoid of women.’ Returning to my application of the salva veritate principle: this highlights that ‘man’, and in extension, terms associated with ‘male’, are unable to evoke ‘a human being of either sex’, and therefore ‘woman’.

But despite the overwhelming understanding of the nouns employed in The Left Hand of Darkness as male, one term in particular remained open to interpretation. ‘Jugglers’ was potentially more ambiguous, several participants commented. ‘[I]n that context [of a medieval procession] everyone would have to be male pretty much apart from the “jugglers”’, Sam from the postgraduate discussion group stated. Alice from the feminist writing group seconded this: ‘when it got to the “jugglers” I thought perhaps that in my mind’s eye I saw it as a group of mainly men but possibly gender-diverse’, which was picked up on by Mandy: ‘you’re right as well, I saw the “jugglers” as oddly male and female I don’t know why.’ But not all participants agreed on this potential ambiguity: ‘I’m not very visual so I didn’t see the “jugglers” as women as well so I don’t read in that way’, Jo added. A potential conclusion given by Claudia from the pilot group was therefore: ‘if you want to set the picture and talk about women as well then you have to feature [them] somewhere.’ In short, to counteract the predominantly male associations imposed by either language and/or convention, a text needs to explicitly ‘talk about women’ to stop ‘talking only about men’. As the respondent summarises, in line with the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, language influences thought; linguistic change is consequently paramount to effect a change in perception.

Specific images were not only perceived in The Left Hand of Darkness; the excerpt from The Cook and the Carpenter equally sparked debate. The terms ‘cook’ and ‘carpenter’ are on a linguistic level as neutral as ‘guards’ and ‘functionaries’ but, to the participants, they also carried specific
associations. Two postgraduate group respondents assigned sex/gender as follows: Jennie stated that ‘they’re like defined by their professions and I think it was the way you’d expect that the man was the “carpenter” and the woman was the “cook”’, while Sarah added, ‘we’re never told who is the woman, who is the man there and we, I think yeah, we just obviously assume the “cook” is going to be a woman and the “carpenter” is going to be a man.’ This ‘traditional’ interpretation was seconded by Mandy from the feminist group: ‘you automatically go “the cook” is a woman, “the carpenter” is a man and it’s sort [of] how much those two professions obviously come with their own sort [of] preconceived gender.’ Again, sex/gender was interpreted even if not linguistically present. Nevertheless, not all participants made the same associations; Sam reflected during the postgraduate discussion group: ‘I thought the cook was a man I don’t really know why’ and ‘I thought the carpenter was a man.’ Jessica from the feminist writing group, on the other hand, commented, ‘I saw them both as female.’ She explained, ‘just because of this story and the pronouns and it just made me think, you know, there’s a possibility in that world that they are both female.’

What becomes clear from the above is that the identification of sex/gender mattered greatly to all respondents. Whether characters are ‘read’ as female or male, participants understood them as either ‘one’ or the ‘other’, never as neutral or in between. As Jennie from the postgraduate group stated, ‘the assumption is that as we picture a character we’d have to pick a gender for them between these two choices.’ She continued: ‘I don’t know if anyone else pictured just a completely androgynous person …, I think probably most people don’t get to that as an option. But there’s nothing to say that any of these worlds needed to [be] underst[ood] as binary, sexist.’ Respondents felt conditioned to ‘pick a sex/gender’ even when a ‘binary’ understanding is not inherent in the language. If terms were potentially neutral, such as ‘guards’ and ‘carpenter’, conventions or context were usually consulted to provide ‘clues’. This has serious implications for neutral language – if readers are unable to imagine a neutral being, and further, predominantly associate male, is linguistic neutrality a viable option? As Jennie reflected in relation to The Left Hand of Darkness, ‘they made a big deal of the first time they gendered somebody and then that was the point that anybody got an identity. So yeah, the name and the description of the person only followed after having been gendered.’ Sex/gender was linked to identity, and readers made sense of characters through its classification. Pronouns played a considerable role in ‘revealing’ sex/gender; in the following section I evaluate how ambiguous anaphors complicate perception.
Considering the impact of pronouns: How they shape readers’ perceptions

The use of ‘I’ in The Left Hand of Darkness and of ‘na’ in The Cook and the Carpenter had considerable impact on participants’ readings. The lack of specificity connotated by these two pronouns led respondents to reflect on the potential sex/gender of a character and the meaning of their assumption. In the pilot focus group a central discussion emerged around the uncertainty of ‘I’. While Janine was keen to know the sex/gender of the narrator, Martina argued that it was insignificant. Their conversation developed as follows: Janine commented first of all, ‘so yeah the narrator usually uses “I” so you don’t, he or she doesn’t really, like, specify if we’re talking about a male or a female.’ This highlights an initial ambiguity around the sex/gender of the first person singular pronoun, which was, however, resolved by linking ‘I’ to the rest of the text. As quoted above, Janine ‘came to the conclusion that with the rest of the text because it’s only talking about men and kings and everything that we’re talking only about men here.’ Martina also reflected on the use of ‘I’ in The Left Hand of Darkness, but her position differed. She observed:

Martina: yeah as you said it doesn’t reveal the narrator’s sex which, however, didn’t make me feel the narrator could be male necessarily. For me it was more, like, [to Janine] not to say that
Janine: yeah, no no no
Martina: I mean you know it’s just a perception that I had. It was more like it’s not relevant
Janine: Hmm
Martina: to the story and that’s why I’m not seeing it

The theme of ‘identifying sex/gender’ versus ‘sex/gender being irrelevant’ continued beyond this initial exchange. After the third pilot focus group participant, Claudia, shared her perception of the text, Janine and Martina returned to their discussion:

Janine: [to Claudia] yeah the thing you said … that you can’t really know if it’s a man or a woman, the narrator, until the end I was thinking, OK maybe at the end we’re going to … have, like, kind of revealed that she is actually the only woman and that’s why she is actually looking at the whole picture but because at the end we don’t really
Martina: it doesn’t matter
Janine: yeah
Martina: I think that’s the, that’s the
Janine: yeah
Martina: question, does it matter do we need to know whether this
is a man or a woman?

Despite her initial declaration that the narrator was male, Janine was still
undecided, which further highlights the ambiguity of ‘I’. She also agreed
with Martina on the surface that sex/gender might be irrelevant. This
conflict over the narrator’s sex/gender, however, was far from resolved.
Janine still ‘needed to know’, as the following exchange illustrates:

Janine: in the book do you actually know who the narrator is?
Martina: it does matter now?
Janine: no, but just who the narrator is, like their story or
Researcher: yes
Janine: do you actually, do you actually get to know that?
Researcher: yes
Martina: you need to read the book, you need to read the book
Researcher: yeah
Janine: well that’s good

It was a relief to Janine that the sex/gender of the narrator is revealed
eventually. Additionally, the use of the phrase ‘know who the narra-
tor is’ shows that sex/gender and identity were perceived as closely
interlinked.

This becomes more poignant still in participants’ reflections on
their understanding of ‘na’ in The Cook and the Carpenter. Again, the pilot
focus group data already brings key concerns surrounding the neutral
pronoun to the fore. As Claudia commented, ‘you read something and
you need to picture what’s going on in your head. What is that, like, an
empty shell of a person?’ This reminds of the limitations of any new lan-
guage in a context that remains defined by the sex/gender binary. The
image of ‘an empty shell of a person’ is a powerful cue of how central
sex/gender is to readers’ understanding of a character. She concluded,
‘you can’t portray a character without actually telling people who they
are.’ Without specificity, then, readers, according to the respondent, are
unable to imagine ‘who’ a character is. Claudia related the impact of
this ambiguity back to the use of ‘I’ in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, which resulted in the following discussion:

Claudia: The same with the first one, the narrator, it’s important in a sense that you need to know who’s telling the story. Are they reliable? Are they making it all up? Am I going to believe it? Am I going to root for them? Am I going to like them or not? It’s like

Martina: yeah

Claudia: if you don’t tell me then what’s the point in listening to your story?

Janine: yeah

Martina: I don’t know, I found it different though, like in the first one it didn’t really matter to me, … I don’t find someone reliable because it’s, they’re a man or a woman

This exchange highlights how the identification of sex/gender potentially moves beyond ascertaining biology to being an indicator of reliability. While Martina openly disagreed with Claudia on this point, as she did with Janine over ‘the need to know’, she eventually conceded that, ‘at the end of the day, to be fair that’s how we see people.’ She explained, ‘when we see people, we want to identify because that helps us understand things kind of in [a] very stereotype way but still this is the way we make sense of reality, so I do understand what you mean.’ Despite her reservations Martina admitted that the identification of sex/gender is key for many readers.

The theme of pronouns as a tool to help readers ‘make sense of reality’ emerged in all three focus group discussions. As Janine reflected on the use of ‘na’, ‘the pronoun it feels weird … I think it’s just because we’re so used to hav[ing] “him” or “her”.’ This reliance on specific referents, which Wittgenstein terms ‘menschliche Gepflogenheiten’ [human customs], is explored also by participants from the postgraduate discussion and feminist writing group. Rich from the postgraduate group commented, for example, ‘I found it quite difficult to place everything, as in I couldn’t tell who was who, whether the “cook” was a man or the “carpenter” was a man or woman cause normally you’d rely so much on the pronouns to sort of build around.’ Jessica from the feminist writers seconded this: ‘I found it a little bit difficult to follow because we use “his”, “her” so much as a shorthand for who the character is, to establish it.’ Sarah
from the postgraduate group explained this dependence: ‘you have a set of assumptions that are just kind of, like, engrained and someone says “he” you see like a “man” and you kind of, you make certain assumptions, certain kind of associations with that.’ She added, ‘so when something like as basic as that, as a pronoun which you have to use or you use them all the time and [inaudible] you can’t have sentences without them.’ This feeling was shared by Rich from the same group: ‘the main thing for me [is] just how unsettling it was to try and read it and how surprising that it’s just such a small feature, that’s so arbitrary and so easily replaceable.’ He concluded, ‘I couldn’t get my head around it quite, I couldn’t read it.’ This illustrates Shaviro’s argument in relation to Wittgenstein that language cannot be altered individually; any linguistic change needs to be agreed on by the speech community. And in the current context, a character might become unreadable if sex/gender is not ‘revealed’.

Although the use of ‘na’ challenged respondents much more profoundly in their understanding than the use of nouns such as ‘cook’ and ‘carpenter’, for which convention or context could be consulted, most participants nevertheless found a tactic to reintroduce sex/gender to the neutral pronoun. Sarah from the postgraduate group reflected, ‘I just had to replace it for “he”, “she” or “they” with the “nan” because I was just kind of like, oh I need to just actually get to read, like, in my head.’ To this Mandy from the feminist group added, ‘I was sort of wondering what the effect of that was because all it did, it meant I went through and implanted my own “he”, “his”, “she”, “hers”.’ She summarised, ‘as much as they might want me to read it “na”, my head was automatically planting in so it’s, like, just how engrained that is I suppose.’ However, this replacement is not necessarily permanent. As Alice commented, ‘I think when you’re first reading it, I’m replacing “nan” with “his”, “her”, “na” with “she”, “he” and I’m doing that but I think as you read on you would get used to [it].’ This was picked up also in the postgraduate discussion group where Rich stated, ‘well I imagine if, once you read the whole book you probably get used to it.’ Janine from the pilot focus group agreed: ‘if we’re going to use at some point in life a neutral pronoun, we’re just going to get used to it like we got used to using “him” or “her”.’ As Davidson and Smith (1999) argue in extension of Wittgenstein’s thought, language is not a fixed entity; it can and does evolve in accordance with new social practices. Martina, however, made an important point regarding the limitations of neutral language in the current sociocultural context:

[T]he point for me is that I think there was an episode of, not violence, but something similar that was going to happen to the girl,
when the girl is named and I think this is important because you don't want to get this violence lost. Cause it was violence or threats or whatever from, done by specific people who were male on a specific person that … was female. And I think that if you kind of mix all the pronouns up and everything, this might get lost which is something important to bear in mind. And I’m very gender-conscious and I’d like to get rid of all the pronouns and everything but there are points in which you need to be strategic about the use of pronouns

While allowing readers to imagine either sex/gender, the very ambiguity of neutral pronouns could potentially do harm in certain instances. Neutralising the sex/gender of perpetrators in violent acts, especially those predominantly committed by men against women, obscures reality. And in doing so, neutral language could potentially weaken arguments for social change; for example, if a perpetrator is presented neutrally some might argue that both women and men are equally likely to commit violent acts against women. This could prevent the implementation of targeted initiatives to redress social norms and inequities. Martina’s observation also moves us beyond considering the impact of pronouns and points toward the final two categories to be explored in this section: ‘reflecting on effectiveness’ and ‘considering feasibility/reality’. She effectively asks whether neutral pronouns are a useful tool in all instances, which highlights a concern for the link between language and reality. I explore other responses relating to the ‘effectiveness’ and ‘feasibility’ of linguistic propositions in more detail next.

Reflecting on effectiveness: How literary texts thematise representation

When reflecting on the effectiveness of the literary excerpts, participants’ readings fitted into two main strands. The first theme revolved around the intention of the texts and the second around their success in highlighting the issue of sex/gender and language. To begin with the first, comments on intent frequently surfaced during the focus group discussions. *The Left Hand of Darkness*, for example, puzzled many participants precisely because of its perceived lack of intentionality. As Martina reflected, ‘I’ve got a preconception of *The Left Hand of Darkness* as being a kind of subversive text’, but ‘I was a bit surprised cause I didn’t find much subversive stuff.’ Rich from the postgraduate discussion group agreed with this interpretation: ‘I didn’t really quite know what to make of it’, he said, ‘cause I was sort of looking for a really blatant feminist point to
come out of it, if you know what I mean, relating it to sort of, you know, real society let’s say. And it did nothing.’ This expectation of a ‘feminist point’ was influenced by the research context, as Rich explained at a later point: ‘I found it difficult … to take any clear points out of it, of a let’s say, regarding a feminist agenda specifically, which is what I was sort of on the lookout for given the topic of discussion.’

The perceived lack of making a ‘clear point’ was understood by other respondents as potentially useful in itself. As Jennie from the postgraduate group commented, ‘even though the professions aren’t gendered, they’re like traditionally gendered professions so that’s probably supposed to be leading so you think that like “masons” and “artisans” and stuff might be men.’ While the language used in *The Left Hand of Darkness* might not provoke an instant reaction, the impact of ‘traditionally gendered professions’ on the imagination of readers did not go unnoticed. Further, when the excerpt did openly specify the sex/gender of a character, it had a powerful effect. As Sarah from the same group reflected on the sexing/gendering of Estraven, ‘then the person [next] to her [the narrator] becomes a man and it’s really, it’s made really obvious, like, it’s kind of trying to jolt you, like almost with force to make [inaudible] you to reflect on it.’ This was seconded by Mandy from the feminist writing group:

I quite liked the fact that it does that quite telling bit where it sort of says ‘man I must say, having said he and his’ that sort of points out to you what you’ve already made your mind up about and … how you’ve sort of already, and even though she [the narrator] said ‘person on the left’ very clearly, you’ve already made your mind up that it’s a man

Jessica agreed: ‘I feel like it’s kind of intentionally drawing attention to itself.’ The intention of the text was therefore perceived by some participants as knowingly understated. This approach, however, was considered problematic by Martina as the excerpt seemed to her ‘a bit too subtle’. Sam from the postgraduate discussion group, on the other hand, saw power in this. She stated, ‘I preferred the first one because it sort of just ambles along and then it hits you.’ Overall, then, participants were undecided as to the text’s effectiveness.

A different discussion emerged around *The Cook and the Carpenter*. The use of ‘na’ especially provoked debate on intent, with a key concern
arising from the use of the neutral pronoun in conjunction with specific terms. Claudia from the pilot focus group argued, for example:

[A]t some point I thought the text identified the ‘na’ or ‘nan’ person as a woman anyway cause they’re like calling her a crazy woman and then they’re calling her a girl so I don’t understand, I didn’t get the whole intention of well, if it’s a woman why can’t you say it’s a woman, why can’t you say it’s ‘her’

Other respondents agreed; as Sarah from the postgraduate discussion group reflected, ‘when they talk about “woman” and “man” then you’re almost surprised, you’re like, oh we’ve just kind of avoided the whole issue of like who is a woman or a man so far.’ This was supported by Jo from the feminist writing group: ‘I was quite disappointed when I got to the use of “woman”, I was like, ah it’s not what I thought it’s going to be … the use of the “woman” I did wonder then, oh what are they trying to achieve, what’s trying to be achieved with the “na”.’ Participants were ‘surprised’ and ‘disappointed’ by this perceived inconsistency; however, that did not mean they considered the neutral pronoun ineffective. ‘Na’ was felt to cause a profound disruption to traditional pronoun usage. As Rich from the postgraduate group commented, ‘I was finding it difficult to track who was saying what and who was, just obviously cause of not being used to the replacement of the pronouns.’ He added, ‘I think [this] is the whole point of it so as to make you rethink the arbitrariness of “his” and “her”.’ Martina, from the pilot focus group, agreed: ‘I think for me on a deeper level, I think it’s trying to show us what it says on the last page which is “it was the same thing either way”. Maybe we shouldn’t give too much importance to “he”, “she”, “her”, “him”.’ In effect, the new language leads to reflections on the linguistic status quo and, in consequence, to the imagination of a new form of life – one that is not as centrally defined by the sex/gender binary.

In terms of overall effectiveness *The Cook and the Carpenter* was ranked highly by Martina. She explained, ‘I think the most successful is the one we all got frustrated and confused about, cause that is actually pointing out that we do work by binaries, we do want to know whether it’s a man or a woman cause otherwise we don’t understand, we can’t make sense of things.’ However, Martina’s description of the text as ‘the one we all got frustrated and confused about’ also highlights a central struggle participants experienced – one that was upheld across all
focus group discussions. As linguistic changes were at odds with what Wittgenstein terms ‘menschliche Gepflogenheiten’ (Wittgenstein 1998, 108), they fundamentally challenged the participants’ understanding. But respondents were unsure whether the experience of ‘frustration/confusion’ was due to the inability to identify the sex/gender of the referent or down to different reasons entirely. Either way, it had a profound impact on the perception of the text. Responses regarding the use of the neutral pronoun were strong, ranging from ‘alienating’ and ‘disorientating’ to ‘clunky’. In consequence, ‘it made it very difficult to read as well, like, I had to go back a thousand times and try and understand it … and then the next sentence you have to do the same, it just made it really slow, it kind of interrupted the flow’, according to Martina. For many participants this ‘slow’ and ‘interrupted’ reading experience was linked to the writing style of the excerpt. For example, several postgraduate group respondents considered the text a ‘language exercise’ or ‘linguistic exercise’, while participants from the feminist writing group commented on ‘the way that the story’s told’ from a stylistic perspective. A discussion between feminist writing group respondents illustrates this:

Alice: just on this technique … I think some of the writing style isn’t very clear and I think that’s what makes this difficult is, I mean I kind of think 1973, I think if someone submitted this as a manuscript now I don’t think it would get published based on this little intro about, you know, kind of talking about a warning but there’s no idea what that is and a threat but there’s no sense

Jessica: it’s a, it’s a challenge

Mandy: it is

Jessica: to the reader I think, you know, it’s a real laying down of the gauntlet because, you know, as first chapters go it’s not the easiest or most you know

Alice: and all they’re doing is just hanging about like collecting some eggs and doing some

Jessica: yeah

Alice: woodwork

Mandy: yeah it’s confusing and who’s speaking when … cause sometimes it’s reported and then you know it’s, like, what I don’t understand how this happened

Alice concluded, ‘I suppose what I’m saying is, I’m happy to read something with gender-neutral pronouns, I think it’s good but it just, the
writing there has to be, you know, compelling writing underneath it for me to read on.’ Janine, from the pilot focus group, also pointed to the narrative style as the key obstacle to understanding:

The story’s really confusing I don’t think it’s because of the pronouns, it’s just you don’t know who’s who so I spent my time going back and trying to actually figure out who’s talking and who’s doing what, so yeah the story is really frustrating because you can’t actually understand it.

In her subsequent conversation with Martina, however, the use of ‘na’ is explored as a key contributor rather than a mere addition to the confusion:

Martina: the pronouns don’t help though
Janine: yeah that’s true because actually, actually yeah if you know they are man or woman I can, they use ‘her’ or ‘he’, ‘his’ or so actually you can sort of place yourself in the story

In effect, Janine felt that specific pronouns are central to understanding and concluded that ‘the second one with the gender-neutral pronoun, well it’s a failure for me, I can’t understand who’s who so it’s just I don’t want to keep reading the story basically.’ That is, the respondent is reluctant to engage with linguistic practices that are at odds with the status quo. And while Alice, from the feminist writing group, shared similar feelings about the limitations of the text, she concluded, on the other hand:

I think the, you know, kind of in terms of language and gender, the male is the default and the female is the exception so when an author disrupts that and has these gender-neutral pronouns I think that’s when like people get really annoyed by it as well cause they’re like who but is it male or is it … I don’t know are they female but I think that is the most kind of, you know, destabilising this kind of binary, you know, that you’ve got this kind of dominant and then this … other so I would say The Cook and the Carpenter is the most interesting kind of linguistically even though it’s unfortunate the way that the story is told.

So while the effectiveness of the text might be impaired by the style of the narrative for some respondents, the neutral pronoun was perceived as effective by Alice.
Participants were much less divided over the effectiveness of the excerpt from *The Daughters of Egalia*. While respondents did not necessarily reflect on the text as thoroughly in relation to the other categories, *The Daughters of Egalia* was frequently mentioned in relation to its perceived success. Martina, from the pilot group, for example, thought it was ‘engaging’ and ‘funny’, while Janine stated, ‘it’s so over-the-top it’s, … it’s kind of a parody, right? So it’s, so I guess for me that just that might be the most useful.’ This was supported by postgraduate discussion group participants, who described the excerpt as ‘in-your-face’ and ‘striking’, to which respondents from the feminist writing group added ‘clear’, ‘vivid’ and ‘in the context of 1977 where, like, you’d be like this is revolutionary.’ In effect, these reflections illustrate the potential of humour to liberate, as proposed by Freud’s theory – the use of ‘revolutionary’ points to both ‘Auflehnung’ and ‘Befreiung’. To explore these responses in more depth, Martina’s comment is useful:

> It’s a good way perhaps to make people realise how sexist society is and how, you know, sexist terms that apply to women, … everything that is usually said of women very stereotypically patronising, patriarchal, sexist and whatever you want is applied to men. … it’s good to make people realise certain things, double standards

Jennie from the postgraduate discussion group supported this understanding: ‘I thought it did a really good job of showing like how instrumental language is in kind of defining the normative and the aberrant so, like, the fact that it’s “men” so that’s the, like, the standard kind of position of personhood and then “women” is a sort of lesser secondary type of “man”.’ Jessica from the feminist writing group elaborated, ‘I liked the inventiveness of the director’s “housebound” and the “man-wom” and, you know, I thought they were interesting collisions of different, you know, ideas.’ This reminds of Redfern’s (1984) argument that wordplay helps to reveal double standards and thereby the role of language in upholding the status quo. As emerged from the data, participants felt the text was ‘obvious’ in its intentions and therefore generally effective.

The ‘ease of reading’ *The Daughters of Egalia* in comparison with *The Cook and the Carpenter* might have contributed to the above perceptions of textual effectiveness. And reflections on the feasibility of the proposed language change arguably also played into such perceptions. I explore comments on the category ‘considering feasibility/reality’ in the next section.
Considering feasibility/reality: How literary proposals could be transferred

This final category overlaps in many ways with the other core themes. However, as reflections on the feasibility/reality of language use distinctly emerged from the data, it is important to present them separately. Participants from the pilot focus group were the first to comment on the relationship between proposed linguistic changes and their place in the ‘real’ world. As Martina commented on *The Daughters of Egalia*, ‘I don’t think it’s feasible in normal – it’s good of a literary text, I find it really engaging and funny – I think it pushes the point a bit too far.’ She clearly felt there is a difference between what is possible in a literary text and ‘normality’; as she explained, ‘I don’t know how feasible it is in real, as in language use on a day-to-day basis.’ Martina believes literary language is not necessarily transferable to ‘language use on a day-to-day basis’ – concerns that were shared by other respondents. As Claudia, this time in relation to *The Cook and the Carpenter*, stated, ‘what’s the point in trying to be neutral when you then, to illustrate a character, need to resort to the normal language anyway.’ She elaborated, ‘like normal as in a guy like this would use a language like this and that’s why you need him in the story, that’s why you have him use this language in the story because otherwise you couldn’t tell the story.’ Claudia was referring to the ‘episode of violence’, which Martina also took issue with. And like Martina, who felt the use of ‘na’ might potentially obscure the sex/gender of perpetrator and victim, Claudia pointed out the need for ‘normal language’ to ‘tell the story’. To her, the narrative cannot be told if readers are unable to understand characters, and this understanding includes the identification of their sex/gender, which ‘na’ complicates.

In fact, reflections on the feasibility of the neutral pronoun emerged across all focus groups. Martina set the tone when commenting, ‘as much as I want to believe in the fact that we can actually use a neutral pronoun to refer to people and etc. etc., I got so confused at some point that I stopped reading it.’ She added, ‘as much as I want to believe that it can actually work, sometimes it doesn’t.’ In short, the proposed changes seem still too profoundly at odds with ‘menschliche Gepflogenheiten’. This perceived failure of ‘na’ was justified by participants in a variety of ways. Jennie from the postgraduate group felt, for example, that “‘nan’ would be too much of, like, a sort of glottal stop I suppose’, and explained, ‘I would have been interested to see what it would have been like if they’d just used “they” instead … cause it’s having to get used to a whole new word.’ An existing pronoun, such as ‘they’, seemed more viable because it is already in common usage. However, Martina questioned: ‘are we ready to get rid of [sexed/gendered] pronouns completely?’ She reflected, ‘I’m
not sure in language use.’ This was seconded by Jennie from the postgraduate discussion group, who queried the use of a neutral pronoun, which presumably includes ‘they’, in a narrative context defined by specificity. ‘[T]hey were linguistically just changing the pronouns but actually it did still seem like a sexist society so then it was, like, will that change anything? Will that matter? Will we still kind of see, like categorise things?’, she asked. Such questions inspired the following discussion between two participants of the postgraduate group, who explored the issue further. In particular, their exploration reveals the popular premise that linguistic change is essentially ineffective.

Rich: it sort of highlights that changing the language without changing the concepts or the sort of prejudices and the stigmas attached to it doesn’t necessarily solve anything, if that makes sense, because you could call everyone ‘na’ and women could still be oppressed …

Jennie: I think you’re right

Rich: What do you mean?

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

Martina agreed that changing pronouns might be problematic in an unequal social context. She stated, ‘let’s try and change the perspectives and the stereotypes rather than, when they’re ready then we’ll get rid of the pronouns.’ To this Janine added, ‘maybe we should try to educate people to actually understand that men and women, we’re different but we’re still equal … instead of trying to change everything.’ A neutral pronoun was consequently considered ineffective if society remained defined by sex/gender.

However, reflections on the feasibility of ‘na’ were not restricted to concerns around how to best address inequality in an unequal social setting. Linguistic questions also played a central role. While some respondents felt they would ‘get used to’ the neutral pronoun, two respondents from the postgraduate group reflected on the stylistic hurdles to any wide-scale acceptance:

Sarah: we’re used to like adding new nouns to our vocabulary as well, technological concepts come out and you just, you add them, you get used to them …
Jennie: that's a good point about that we're really used to adding new nouns to our vocabulary so that doesn't pose too much of a problem, cause I thought one of the problems with the second [The Cook and the Carpenter] was that because pronouns are such common words

These comments emerged from a comparison of The Cook and the Carpenter and The Daughters of Egalia in terms of linguistic changes. While 'Egalia' remained 'readable' to most participants despite considerable modifications, Arnold's text caused a profound disruption to the reading experience. As Jo from the feminist writing group commented, 'even when I saw that the roles were reversed [in the English translation of Brantenberg's excerpt] I still had a woman and a man in my head whereas I didn’t with this one ... and that was simply “he” and “she”, and “na” and “nan” that made that difference.’

Disrupting traditional pronoun usage therefore clearly challenged respondents’ understanding, as pronouns support the specific interpretation of characters. As Janine stated, ‘the pronoun [“na”], it feels weird not because, I think it’s just because we’re so used to hav[ing] “him” or “her”.’ This familiarity has a central impact, Janine explained: ‘if, you know, they are man or woman I can, they use “her” or “he”, “his” or so actually you can sort of place yourself in the story.’ The reference to ‘placing yourself in the story’ highlights the importance of ‘knowing’ the sex/gender of referents. Readers occupy a specific ‘place’ in society, and so do characters in the fictional world. This is potentially why The Left Hand of Darkness and The Daughters of Egalia did not cause any great concern in terms of feasibility – except for the narrative voice in the first excerpt, sex/gender can be clearly identified. And if language use was ambiguous, such as in the use of ‘I’, participants found relevant clues to aid identification. The narrator of The Left Hand of Darkness, for example, was interpreted by respondents as ‘female’ or ‘male’ on the basis of the sex/gender of the author, the sex/gender of the reader and the sex/gender of a traditional central character. If such clues were missing, however, or were not accessible at first instance, feelings of frustration and confusion frequently emerged from the data relating to The Cook and the Carpenter. Repeated concerns around ‘needing to know’ consequently resulted in the formation of a new central category. The next section presents the results of theoretical sampling, which tests the boundaries of this new core. I employ the data emerging from the German focus groups to further explore the impact of the literary excerpts in relation to raising awareness of the issue of sex/gender and language.
Theoretical sampling – Native German responses

Identifying sex/gender is, according to Martina, ‘the way people actually make sense of reality’. She explained that ‘we do want to know whether it’s a man or a woman cause otherwise we don’t understand, we can’t make sense of things.’ Without linguistic clues as to whether a character was ‘female’ or ‘male’, Janine felt ‘you don’t really know who is who’, and, as Claudia termed it, encounter only ‘an empty shell of a person’. This core theme of ‘needing to know’ emerged across all focus groups and informed the subsequent analysis of the two native German transcripts. This specific focus further contributed to the formation of grounded theory from the data.

The research context for the native German discussions differed in several ways from that of the native English groups. First of all, I recruited participants via a general call for respondents within the university. Participants therefore did not have any previous familiarity with one another or with me. Secondly, I asked respondents to complete ‘The Inventory of Attitudes Toward Sexist/Nonsexist Language – General (IASNL-G)’ online. While the results of the questionnaire did not impact on the formation of the native English-speaking groups, this time they informed the selection and grouping of participants. Thirteen respondents completed the questionnaire and eight took part in two focus groups conducted in German. Of these, five, Matthias, Antje, Ines, Jochen and Katrin, had a supportive attitude toward non-sexist language, with an average score of 84. The remaining three respondents, Sebastian, Doreen and Berit, held neutral attitudes, with an average of 69 – ‘total scores between 52.6 and 73.5 reflect a neutral attitude’ (Parks and Robertson 2000, 434). The groups were led with a translated script as well as translated materials; both The Left Hand of Darkness and The Daughters of Egalia exist in German translation; I translated the excerpt from The Cook and the Carpenter for the purposes of this study. All other processes and procedures remained the same.

The participants identified as white and native German speakers. The group with supportive attitudes consisted of three female and two male participants, and respondents were on average 26 years old. Two female and one male participant took part in the focus group formed of those with a neutral attitude toward non-sexist language; respondents were slightly younger, with an average age of 21. As the focus groups did not originate from pre-existing connections, individual motivations played a more central role in the decision to participate. These ranged from a general curiosity about the study – as one respondent commented,
‘eigentlich war’s ganz spontan actually, as I have never done anything like this before and I thought it sounded like an interesting topic, so I wanted to have a look what it’s like]– to a comparative interest in the issue of sex/gender and language: ‘so eine Sprach- und Geschlechterstudie ist interessant besonders wenn man halt diesen Deutsch-Englischen Kontrast sieht’ [such a language and sex/gender study is interesting, especially when one sees the contrast between German and English]. The appeal of speaking German was also mentioned by a third, ‘ich mach hier mit, weil ich Deutschunterricht vermissen und weil ich schon richtig lange kein Deutsch mehr geredet hab’ [I'm taking part because I miss German classes and because I haven’t spoken German in a long time]. Owing to the lack of prior relationships between participants, the dynamics of both native German-speaking groups were consequently different. However, as I explore here, the concerns of respondents were similar to those who took part in previous meetings. As indicated above, particular attention is paid to reflections on the new core category ‘needing to know’.

A first close reading of the transcript of the German group with supportive attitudes brought five initial codes to light. These were: 1. ‘perceiving sex/gender clearly (due to language and/or context)’, 2. ‘perceiving a disruption to the assumed sex/gender’, 3. ‘potentially perceiving no sex/gender’, 4. ‘not knowing who is who’ and 5. ‘perceiving sex/gender as helpful to understanding’. An example helps to illustrate how one of these codes emerged. When asked to reflect on _The Cook and the Carpenter_, Matthias from the first group commented as follows: ‘ich hab das dann als letztes tatsächlich durch … “er” [ersetzt] also eigentlich hab ich ihn dann als männlichen genommen, aber ich hätte es auch als weiblichen nehmen können, aber es macht dann den Text viel einfacher zu lesen’ [I have eventually actually [replaced it] with … ‘he’, so actually I took it as male, but I could have also understood it as female, but it makes the text much easier to read]. That is, only by referring back to linguistic norms was the participant able to engage with the narrative. The respondent decided to replace ‘na’ with ‘er’ as the specific pronoun facilitated reading. He elaborated, ‘also einfach nur weil man, glaub ich, dann mit dieser grammatischen Funktion einfach vertrauter ist, … dann dachte [ich], na ja wenn ich das ersetze … also dann wenn ich einfach nur irgendein Geschlecht einsetze, dann liest sich der Text viel einfacher’ [simply because one, I think, is more familiar with this grammatical function, … I thought, if I replace it … so if I simply insert any sex/gender, then the text is much easier to read].
Matthias reflected that traditional pronouns were a familiar grammatical feature. And further, he felt that this familiar feature supported the reading of the text. Replacing a neutral pronoun with a specific one, according to the participant, therefore resulted in an ‘einfacher’ reading experience. Essentially, he was ‘perceiving sex/gender as helpful to understanding’, which along with similar comments made by other participants, led to the emergence of this particular code.

Evidence for all five codes above also surfaced from a close reading of the second German transcript. As in the evaluation of the pilot and English-speaking focus groups, diagrams enabled me to compare data within and across both transcripts as well as observe connections between codes. For example, I noticed a link between comments made on ‘potentially perceiving no sex/gender’ and ‘not knowing who is who’, which allowed me to test and develop each category. Through this comparative process, four final subcategories emerged: 1. ‘perceiving sex/gender clearly’, 2. ‘perceiving sex/gender as helpful’, 3. ‘having doubts about sex/gender’, which now included ‘perceiving a disruption to the assumed sex/gender’ and ‘not knowing who is who’, and 4. ‘potentially perceiving no sex/gender’. In the following sections I test the boundaries of each and explore whether they hold up to scrutiny. This classification expands my previous investigation into the effectiveness of literary texts thematising sex/gender and language, and their impact on readers.

Perceiving sex/gender clearly: How language categorises human beings

Repeated identification of the sex/gender of characters by participants resulted in the creation of this category. As in the pilot and English-speaking focus groups, respondents perceived certain characters as specifically male or female. As Katrin from the first German group (supportive attitudes) commented in relation to The Left Hand of Darkness, this understanding was often shaped by the language used in the excerpt. ‘[A]ls mir schon aufgefallen ist, also jetzt die “Herrschaften” wurden auch alle als “Herrschaften” benannt … also aus meiner Sicht wirkt das wie gezielt männlich bezeichnet’ [So what I noticed is, the lords [Herren = men] were all described as lords … so from my point of view it appears as if purposefully described as male], she stated. Berit from the second German group (neutral attitudes) agreed with this interpretation. When prompted to reflect on whom she imagined when reading the excerpt, she said, ‘ich finde männlich … also es werden auch manchmal Männer explizit erwähnt und dass, dann denkt man sich, dass bestimmt auch ansonsten nur Männer da sind, zum Beispiel wird gesagt
“dann kommen die Herren, Bürgermeister und Vertreter”” [I think male … sometimes men are also explicitly referred to and that, one thinks that there must be only men otherwise as well, for example when it’s said ‘then come the lords/men, mayors and representatives’]. This again illustrates the relevance of the hypothesis that language influences thought, and more specifically, perception. However, Sebastian from the same group doubted whether such nouns necessarily referred to men only. He argued that certain terms are ‘theoretisch’ open to interpretation. Nevertheless, he also admitted that in combination with specific nouns these quickly become restricted:

[D]as stimmt, also im Bezug auf die eine Textstelle, wo nur ‘Herren’ kommt, da ist es sehr komisch, dass nur ‘Herren’ steht und nicht ‘Frauen’ … manche Bezeichnungen sind ja an sich offen, zum Beispiel, also meiner Meinung nach ‘Bürgermeister’ und ‘Vertreter’, aber dadurch, dass eben ein Begriff ‘Herren’ sehr explizit ist, stimmt das, das wird abgeschwächt. Die Herren an sich also sind, das sind nur Männer und könnte man die Schlußfolgerung daraus ziehen, dass die anderen Teilnehmer auch nur männlich sind

[[T]hat’s true, in relation to the one passage where there are only lords men, that is very strange that it only says lords and not women … some descriptions are open in themselves, for example, from my point of view ‘mayors’ and ‘representatives’, but because, as the term lords is very explicit, it’s true, it is diminished. The lords in themselves are, they are only men and one could therefore come to the conclusion that the other participants are only male as well]

He agreed that the language used in the excerpt seemed to encourage the identification of one particular sex/gender, and further, one rather than the other.

Context and association were another aid in deciding whether characters were female or male. As Jochen from the first group commented in relation to *The Cook and the Carpenter*, ‘beim Tischler war es irgendwie so, weil der auch irgendwie mit der Arbeit assoziiert wurde, dass um irgendwelche[s] Brettersägen oder so was ging, da hab ich mir den einfach als männlichen Tischler vorgestellt, so assoziiert’ [for the carpenter it was somehow, because he was somehow associated with the work, that it was about sawing boards or something, I simply imagined him as a male carpenter, associated]. In addition, context encouraged specific interpretation, as Sebastian from the second group suggested: ‘das gab
es ja früher auch, dass eben manche Berufsbilder eben vor allem männlich geprägt sind und … dieses Berufsbild dann dort in dieser Prozession langmarschiert, dass es dann sozusagen indirekt auch nur Männer sind’ [that existed in the past as well that some job profiles are predominantly linked to male and … this job profile marches in this procession, that it is, so to speak, indirectly only men as well]. This line of reasoning was similar to participants’ reflections during the pilot and English-speaking focus groups; most participants found evidence for sex/gender either in convention or context. However, the German groups also drew on grammatical gender to identify whether a character was male or female. For example, in my translation of The Cook and the Carpenter I replaced the default article ‘der’ (masc.) with ‘de’ (neut.) – in line with the Low German article – to obscure the immediate connotations of the grammatical gender. Consequently, ‘der Koch’ was referred to as ‘de Koch’, and ‘der Tischler’ as ‘de Tischler’. Nevertheless, the neutral article was unable to override the dominant associations for most respondents. Ines from the first group explained that ‘war das “de” für mich einfach nur, da hat jemand das “r” vergessen und damit war das nach wie vor männlich und dann “de Koch” blieb einfach “Koch”, “der Koch”’ [the ‘de’ was for me simply, someone forgot the ‘r’ and therefore it was still male and ‘de Koch’ simply remained ‘cook’, ‘the (masc.) cook’]. Doreen from the second group agreed that the dominant connotation remained, ‘da ja auch “Koch” und “Tischler” ja die männliche Variante der Berufsbezeichnungen sind, ansonsten wär es ja “de Köchin” und “de Tischlerin”’ [‘cook’ and ‘carpenter’ are the male version of the job titles, otherwise it would be ‘de Köchin’ and ‘de Tischlerin’]. The familiar grammatical gender of terms therefore also played a key role in identification.

As clearly emerged from the data, language contributed to the perception of sex/gender. It generally seemed to guide readers to decide whether a character was one or the other. However, as Berit from the second group argued, this linguistic sexing/gendering goes further than nouns referring to characters directly, and also included actions and emotions. She reflected in relation to The Daughters of Egalia:

[I]ch glaub es will halt auch darauf anspielen, dass Leute, dass viele Leute sagen zwar ja es macht doch gar nichts, dass halt die Sprache so männlich geprägt ist, zum Beispiel mit ‘Beherrschung’ also wenn ich sag, ich verlier die Beherrschung … also ich hab noch nie bei dem Wort ‘Beherrschung’ darüber nachgedacht, dass das irgendwie so männlich geprägt ist. Das ist einfach nur ein Wort und viele Leute sagen, ja ach lass doch die Sprache die Sprache sein, und das
find ich auch meistens, aber dieser Text zeigt halt wenn [man] das dann mal vertauscht und sagt 'Befrauschung' das klingt direkt total seltsam

[I think it wants to allude to the fact that many people say, it doesn’t matter that language is androcentric. For example, ‘composure’, when I say I’m losing my composure … when using the term composure [Be-herr-schung] I have never thought about it being androcentric. It’s just a word and many people say, just let language be language and most of the time I agree, but this text shows that when you reverse it and say ‘Befrauschung’ then it sounds completely strange]

As ‘Egalia’ illustrated to the respondent, even terms that do not connote sex/gender directly are weighted. Antje from the first group agreed that the third excerpt made this particularly obvious. She stated, ‘teilweise wurde einem dann so ein bisschen vor Augen geführt was man gar nicht merkt in der Alltagssprache, wie also, wo überall solche Geschlechtssachen auftauchen’ [to some extent one was made aware a bit of what one doesn’t notice in everyday language, where all these sex/gender things appear]. As Barr (1989) argues in relation to Brantenberg’s text, the subversion of dominant norms renders it ‘a social corrective – a weapon’. Through wordplay the novel effectively highlights the extent and impact of the status quo. Participants noticed how used they are to ‘reading’ sex/gender, and often, they felt led to interpret one sex/gender rather than the other; that is, in line with male-as-norm. As Sebastian from the second group responded in relation to The Cook and the Carpenter:

[A]lso war bei mir dazu geführt hat, dass ich als Männer wahrgenommen hab, ist vielleicht eher so die grundlegende Voreinstellung – ist vielleicht komisch, da müsste man auch länger drüber nachdenken, das ist nur das Erste was mir in den Sinn gekommen ist. Dass … man solange dazu neigt von einem Mann auszugehen, bis im Text das Gegenteil kommt

[What made me perceive them as men is perhaps more of a default position – it’s perhaps strange, one needs to think about this more deeply. But it’s the first thing that came to my mind. That … one tends to assume it’s a man until the text says otherwise]

In support of the pilot and English focus group data, sex/gender was also perceived clearly by most German focus group members. Further,
respondents reflected that ‘knowing’ the sex/gender of a referent was helpful when reading and understanding a text. I will now evaluate such comments in more detail.

Perceiving sex/gender as helpful: How linguistic norms rely on classification

Participants did not comment as frequently as in the English-speaking focus groups on the helpfulness of sex/gender; that is, that this marker enabled them to imagine a particular character. However, reflections were strong enough to merit the creation of this particular category. A good example is the following observation by Matthias from the first German-speaking focus group. As quoted earlier, he explained the replacement of ‘na’ with ‘er’ in *The Cook and the Carpenter* by stating, ‘ich hab das dann als letztes tatsächlich durch ... “er” [ersetzt] also eigentlich hab ich ihn dann als männlichen genommen, aber ich hätte es auch als weiblichen nehmen können, aber es macht dann den Text viel einfacher zu lesen’ [I have eventually actually [replaced it] with ... ‘he’, so actually I took it as male, but I could have also understood it as female, but it makes the text much easier to read]. This perception of an easier reading experience was seconded by Antje from the same group. She stated, ‘irgendwann hat man es dann ersetzt, dann ging es eben wieder, weil irgendwie es war mühsam’ [at some point one replaced it, then it was okay again, because somehow it was cumbersome]. When prompted to reflect on the choice of pronoun, she added, ‘jeweils manchmal ausprobiert, bezieht es sich jetzt auf die Person ... und dann ja jetzt macht es Sinn OK’ [experimented sometimes, does it refer to this person ... and yes, now it makes sense OK]. Antje considered the use of ‘er’ or ‘sie’ less ‘mühsam’ than the neutral pronoun: ‘dann ging es eben wieder’ and ‘jetzt macht es Sinn’, she confirmed. The data from the second group supported these findings. Berit, for example, mentioned that she also replaced ‘na’ when reading: ‘ich hab das immer ersetzt durch das passende normale Pronomen’ [I always replaced it with the appropriate normal pronoun]. The use of ‘normal’ is here revealing – having linguistic access to the referent’s sex/gender is consequently judged routine, a familiar grammatical function.

In fact, as long as specification followed traditional conventions, it was not even perceived as a feature of language. Matthias from the first group stated in relation to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, ‘also der erste Text war einfach ein Text, der sich mit de[r] Geschlechtsersache vielleicht gar nicht so explizit beschäftigt’ [so the first text was simply a text, which perhaps didn’t engage with the sex/gender subject explicitly]. Linguistic
specificity was not noticed precisely because it was considered ordinary. Antje agreed that ‘beim ersten Text ja stimm ich dir auch zu … es wurde halt ein Bild gezeichnet und dadurch, dass das eh in so einer nicht-realen Welt war, hat man es halt einfach so akzeptiert wie es ist … halt viele Männer waren da und die sind diejenigen, die in den hohen Positionen sind’ [with the first text I agree with you … a picture was created and as a result, that it was in an unreal world anyway, one simply accepted it as it was … that many men were there and they are the ones who have status]. The predominance of male terms and associations might have been frequently reflected on by focus group members as problematic; however, specification in itself was understood as commonplace. Katrin confirmed: ‘weil es halt realistisch eben in der Zeit, aber eben auch in der Sprache auch so rüberkam, weil eben die meisten patriarchalischen Bezeichnungen eben männlich waren, weil dass eben alles Männer sind … also unter dem fand ich das gar nicht so unpassend’ [because it was realistic of the time, but was also portrayed in the language, because most patriarchal terms were male, because they are all men … therefore I didn’t find it necessarily inappropriate]. Further, as became obvious from the data leading to the emergence of the next subcategory, sex/gender was a central requirement to comprehend a text and its portrayed characters. In the following section I focus on participants’ comments regarding ‘having doubts about sex/gender’ and the consequences of this uncertainty.

Having doubts about sex/gender: How neutral terms complicate classification

Similar to the responses by pilot and English-speaking focus group members, the German participants struggled when unable to identify sex/gender. Antje from the first group, for example, commented in relation to the use of ‘na’ in The Cook and the Carpenter: ‘man weiß eigentlich nicht um wen es sich handelt … ja ob es nun ein Mann oder eine Frau ist oder ein Mädchen oder ein Junge, was aber sehr verwirrend ist, weil man selten weiß, auf wen sich das jetzt genau bezieht’ [one doesn’t know who is being referred to … if it is a man or a woman or a girl or a boy, which is very confusing, because one rarely knows who is definitely being referred to]. She added, ‘dadurch dass immer nur “na” [verwendet wurde] war das sehr ungenau in meinem Kopf auf wen es sich jetzt bezieht’ [because only ‘na’ was used at all times it was very unclear in my mind who is being referred to]. As the proposed changes are at odds with linguistic norms, readers were unable to ‘make sense’ of the narrative. ‘Verwirrend’
was also a key term employed by respondents from the second group. However, not only the neutral pronoun caused confusion, the use of ‘de’, rather than ‘der’, as default article was also perceived as problematic. Berit from the second group argued: ‘ich fand das ganz verwirrend mit dem “de” das hat mich total gestört’, and added, ‘das hat mich mehr gestört als das “na” weil das “na” konnte ich ganz einfach ersetzen im Text’ [I found it really confusing with the ‘de’, it really bothered me … it bothered me more than the ‘na’ because the ‘na’ I could easily replace in the text]. She explained, ‘soll ich da jetzt sagen “de” oder “der” oder meint jetzt halt das einen komischen Eigennamen? Das hat mich total gestört’ [should I now say ‘de’ or ‘der’ or does it mean a strange personal name? That really bothered me].

A name, however, is often associated with a particular sex/gender. As explored above, respondents interpreted terms referring to characters as either female or male. And ‘de Koch’ and ‘de Tischler’ were often classified according to their default grammatical gender and/or dominant associations, whether understood as names or job titles. For example, Doreen from the second group reflected, ‘das “de” kann ja auch ein Adelstitel “von” sein, deswegen hab ich das dann nachher als Eigennamen gewertet, aber ich konnte es von diesen Berufsbezeichnungen … nicht lösen … also bei “de Tischler” hab ich die ganze Zeit an einen Tischler gedacht, das war so verbunden’ [the ‘de’ could also be a title of nobility ‘von’, therefore I took it as a personal name in the end but I couldn’t detach it from these job titles … so with ‘de Tischler’ I thought of a carpenter the whole time, that was linked]. I prompted both German-speaking groups to consider whether the use of the female/neutral suffix ‘-In’, as in ‘KöchIn’ or ‘TischlerIn’ – with capital ‘I’ indicating inclusivity – would have had an impact on their perception. And while I evaluate specific responses in more depth in the final section, one comment was instructive in relation to this subcategory. As Doreen from the second group reflected on the potential use of the ‘Binnen-I’:

[I]ch hätte mir auf jeden Fall darüber Gedanken gemacht ob es ein Mann oder eine Frau ist, weil so hab ich direkt vom ersten Satz an, war mir klar das sind beides Männer ‘de Koch’ und ‘de Tischler’. Es wär aber auch an sich nicht nur wegen des Geschlechts merkwürdig gewesen, sondern einfach bei einer Einzelperson das einzufügen, weil das, müsste es eigentlich klar sein ob es männlich oder weiblich ist

[I would have definitely thought about whether it is a man or a woman, because this way I have directly from the first sentence, it
was clear to me that they are both men ‘de Koch’ and ‘de Tischler’. It would have been strange, however, not only because of the sex/gender, but because including it for a single person, because that should be actually clear whether it is male or female]

The expectation of the respondent was that the sex/gender of an individual referent would be known. Neutrality or ‘doubts about sex/gender’ would consequently be an oddity. So when sex/gender was obscured, such as by the use of ‘na’, it created difficulties for the reader. And these difficulties manifested themselves not only in the understanding of characters, but also in terms of engaging with the text in general.

As Ines from the first group stated, ‘ich find das baut Distanz zum Text auf. Dadurch, dass man auf diese Art und Weise denken muss, ist es ein bisschen Analysearbeit und wenn das Prosa ist, die zur Unterhaltung dient, das würde ich nicht in meiner Freizeit lesen’ [I think it creates a distance to the text. As one has to think in this particular way, it is a bit of analytic work and when it’s prose that intends to entertain, I wouldn’t read it in my free time]. She explained, ‘das ist ein Gefühl wissenschaftlichen Arbeitens, wo ich gucken muss, OK was bezieht sich auf was, wer ist wer, was möchte gesagt werden … also ich würde nicht so in die Handlung reinfallen’ [it’s a feeling of scientific work, where I have to look, OK what refers to what, who is who, what does it intend to say … I wouldn’t become immersed in the plot]. This reminded of Janine’s comment during the pilot focus group: ‘the second one with the gender-neutral pronoun well it’s a failure for me, I can’t understand who’s who so … I don’t want to keep reading the story basically.’ That is, the perceived clash with ‘menschliche Gepflogenheiten’ leads participants to disengage, highlighting the limitations of a new language proposed in isolation. Not all respondents agreed with this position, however. Alice from the English feminist writing group felt that the use of the neutral pronoun helped to disrupt binaries and thereby made a valuable point regarding sex/gender and language. Matthias from the first German group agreed: ‘der mittlere Text, der war viel sprachlicher für mich, weil der halt durch dieses “na”, was ich halt nicht so wirklich verstanden habe am Anfang … und das hat halt diese Sprache viel mehr hervorgehoben und das damit zu experimentieren’ [the middle text was more linguistic for me because of this ‘na’, which I didn’t really understand in the beginning … and that has highlighted this language a lot more and to experiment with it]. ‘Having doubts about sex/gender’ can therefore be perceived as fruitful as well as ‘verwirrend’. I evaluate responses to the final subcategory, ‘potentially perceiving no sex/gender’, in the next section.
The final subcategory of ‘needing to know’ emerged from participants’ reflections on potentially neutral terms. While most nouns referring to characters were understood as sexed/gendered for linguistic and/or contextual reasons, some remained ‘theoretisch’ open to interpretation. For example, Matthias from the first German group commented on his understanding of ‘Tischler’: ‘ich denke, das war eher so als Name hab ich das wahrgenommen als jetzt, also ich hab da kein Geschlecht [wahrgenommen] keine Ahnung’ [I think I perceived it as more of a name, so I didn’t perceive a sex/gender, no idea]. ‘Koch’ also remained potentially neutral, as Jochen from the same group reflected, ‘während ich mir “de Koch” irgendwie gar nicht vorgestellt habe, war es beim “Tischler” irgendwie so, weil der auch irgendwie mit der Arbeit assoziiert wurde’ [while I didn’t really imagine ‘de’ Koch’, for the carpenter it was somehow, because he was somehow associated with the work]. However, it was the prompt to consider the use of the ‘-In’ suffix instead that resulted in most reflections on neutrality. Matthias from the first group suggested: ‘so ein Binnen-I, dann würde das halt ganz explizit meinen Gedanken darauf gehören, dass es geschlechterneutral ist. Also ich … hätte mir dann kein Geschlecht vorgestellt, dann wäre ehrlich gesagt das egal quasi’ [such a Binnen-I, then it would have explicitly made me think about that it is neutral. So I … wouldn’t have imagined a sex/gender, then to tell the truth it wouldn’t have mattered]. Sebastian from the second group agreed: ‘das [Binnen-I] hätte einen Unterschied gemacht, weil dann konkret darauf hingewiesen wird, dass es geschlechtsneutral sein soll’ [the Binnen-I would have made a difference, because then it would have been concretely shown that it’s meant to be neutral]. He explained, ‘für mich war das bis jetzt einfach nur ein Name, hinter dem sich eine verborgene Persönlichkeit eben verbirgt und wenn man “TischlerIn” oder “KöchIn” geschrieben hätte, dann hätte man explizit gemacht, dass es neutral ist’ [for me it was until now just a name which refers to a hidden personality and if one had written ‘TischlerIn’ or ‘KöchIn’ then one would have made explicit that it’s neutral]. This illustrates the potential of a new language to evoke a new form of life. The ‘Binnen-I’ is a relatively new addition to German and continues to be contested. Nevertheless, its increasing familiarity is, judging from the responses, beginning to result in acceptance as well as the conception of a neutral alternative to the status quo.

But while characters might have potentially been perceived as neutral owing to the ‘-In’ suffix, participants’ difficulty in understanding the
neutral pronoun suggests the suffix might have created equal complications. As Jochen from the first group reflected on the use of ‘na’:

[A]n manchen Punkten war es aber einfach auch zweideutig, dass man nicht ganz genau wusste, bezieht sichs jetzt auf eine männliche Person oder auf eine weibliche Person und da war es dann besonders schwierig. Aber ich denke aus dem Zusammenhang vielleicht hat es sich dann ergeben, ich glaube das war schwieriger zu lesen auf jeden Fall

[I think in some instances it was ambiguous, that one didn’t really know, does this refer to a male person or to a female person and then it was particularly difficult. But I think from the context it perhaps became clear. I thought it was more difficult to read definitely]

However, whether the use of the suffix would have the same impact remains to be tested. What did emerge from the existing data is that most respondents reacted strongly when unable to categorise a character as either male or female. This reaction generally manifested itself in feelings of frustration/confusion, as well as a reduced engagement with the text. Despite the very different environments and social hierarchies presented in The Left Hand of Darkness and The Daughters of Egalia, the excerpts remained ‘readable’ to participants, arguably because of the recognisable specification of referents. The Cook and the Carpenter, on the other hand, disrupted the usual associations. Consequently, focus group members often felt unable to tell ‘who is who’ and struggled to make sense of the excerpt altogether.

Having access to the sex/gender of characters was key to understanding a narrative, just as knowing the sex/gender of human beings is key to understanding reality. Being able to identify whether someone is ‘female’ or ‘male’ is central to human interaction in the readers’ sociocultural context, and this centrality visibly emerged from the data. Participants’ responses across all focus groups highlighted that they ‘needed to know’ and voiced frustration and confusion if clues were not given by terms and/or contexts. The data from this study supports the new core category ‘needing to know’ – The Cook and the Carpenter, in particular, prompted readers to reflect on this central requirement. In the following section I draw some first conclusions before I assess the findings of my study in relation to my overall proposal that literary texts can help to promote inclusive language use.
Conclusions

Previous research in the field of sex/gender and language has illustrated the link between language and imagination, as well as its impact on speakers. As Gastil's study (1990) showed, the English pronoun ‘he’ largely evokes ‘man’ in participants’ minds. Equally, German male generics lead respondents to predominantly presume ‘male’, according to Stahlberg et al.’s research (2001). This cognitive bias has profound consequences. For example, if a job advertisement is worded in male terms, women feel less motivated to apply for the position, as Stout and Dasgupta’s study (2011) highlighted. And even if women apply for a male-worded role, respondents in Horvath and Sczesny’s study (2016) considered them less suitable. Building on these findings, researchers have explored potential solutions to the linguistic male-as-norm. ‘Beidnennung’ [pair forms], for example, results in a more egalitarian conception of the sexes/genders, according to Braun et al.’s study (1998). Moreover, the impact of inclusive language has been investigated by Vervecken et al. (2013). As their results showed, when children are presented with job titles in pair forms, they perceive women and men as similarly successful. Additionally, girls show more interest in pursuing traditionally male positions when pair forms are employed.

However, inclusive language remains far from the norm. Despite revisions of official language use, wider linguistic change continues to be slow and contested. A big hurdle seems the reluctance of general language users to employ inclusive terms, as Sczesny et al.’s (2015) study showed. Lack of familiarity and awareness, in particular, are key inhibitors. However, as Koeser et al. (2015) highlighted in their research, speakers adapt their language use when presented with inclusive terms. Furthermore, male participants increase their usage after encountering awareness-raising texts. This was the starting point for my study: I hypothesised that literary texts can help to sensitise readers to and, in extension, promote inclusive language use. As the focus group responses showed, literary texts encourage engagement with the issue of sex/gender and language. Moreover, as the data highlighted, literary texts prompt readers to reconsider biased language use. But not all literary approaches illustrate the issue equally. For example, the excerpt from The Left Hand of Darkness was felt to be too subtle by many focus group members. Because of its ‘traditional’ use of nouns and pronouns – those that favour a male interpretation – respondents frequently did not notice that it was making a point about sex/gender
and language at all. *The Cook and the Carpenter*, on the other hand, provoked many participants to think about the function and usefulness of neutral pronouns. Being presented with ‘na’, instead of the familiar ‘she’ or ‘he’, focus group members responded with frustration and confusion, on the one hand. On the other, they also reflected on the binaries inherent in language. In contrast, *The Daughters of Egalia* stimulated discussion on sex/gender and language by reversing androcentric terms. This approach was most readily understood as effective by participants – perhaps because it remained ‘readable’ in terms of clearly identifying either sex/gender. The impact of *The Cook and the Carpenter* and *The Daughters of Egalia*, in particular, is summarised by Martina as follows:

> I think, you know, all our reactions … kind of show that they [the literary excerpts], even though we haven’t understood anything about the second one, even though the third one was confusing … it’s proof of the fact that it’s doing something to us even if we don’t understand what they’re talking about, we’re getting frustrated, we’re getting angry, we’re kind of engaging with the text. And I think that’s the whole point about texts and that’s how things can perhaps change when you come across something like this.

Prompting in-depth responses and reflections suggests that literary texts are highly effective, and in this case, in illustrating the issue of sex/gender and language. Additionally, as the emergence of grounded theory from the data highlighted, responses to the literary texts reveal the importance of the linguistic category sex/gender to begin with. Participants ‘need to know’ a character’s sex/gender in order to make sense of a narrative. As McConnell-Ginet (1979) argues, in the current socio-cultural context human beings are identified as either ‘female’ or ‘male’. Consequently, this information seems essential to facilitate communication and understanding. Arnold’s text particularly illustrated the reliance on the sex/gender binary to respondents, and in turn prompted them to reflect on the linguistic status quo.

In the Conclusions I relate the findings of my focus group study to the literary and linguistic insights. I draw together my evidence that literary texts can be a valuable tool to raise awareness of the issue of linguistic representation. As a result, I propose how this tool can be most effectively applied and explore its value for future research.
Notes

1. As becomes visible throughout my analysis, integrating this level of reflexivity is challenging.
2. Owing to time constraints I focused on the first few pages of each text.
3. All names have been changed.