Conclusions

Despite decades of research and empirical support, inclusive language use is far from the norm in the English and German language. While some progress has been made – many official guidelines today recommend inclusive terminology – changes remain contested, and many English and German speakers continue to employ male generic terms. As studies by Kuhn and Gabriel (2014) and Sczesny et al. (2015) showed, only a minority of speakers use inclusive terms spontaneously. However, the authors also found that raising awareness of the importance of inclusive language can make a tangible difference. After encountering texts that aim to sensitise readers, usage generally improved. This was the starting point for my proposal: I suggested literary texts can sensitise readers to the impact of biased language and thereby promote inclusive language use. To explore the validity of my proposal I employed an interdisciplinary approach: in the first part of this book I evaluated the effectiveness of literary texts thematising sex/gender and language from a linguistic and philosophical perspective; in the second, I conducted a focus group study to gauge their ability to raise awareness of the importance of inclusive language.

My premise was based on the findings of narrative research. As Green and Brock (2000) found, through the process of transportation readers accept narrative characters and events as ‘real’. Moreover, depending on the level of transportation, readers adjust their beliefs in line with the fictional perspective. As Hoeken and Fikkers’s research (2014) showed, this adjustment takes place even when readers hold different views from the ones presented in the narrative. That is, transportation encourages readers to tap into feelings of identification and empathy, and restrain critical faculties. The desire of readers to engage with a narrative therefore allows literary texts to ‘get under the radar’, as Dal Cin et al. (2004) term it, of certain preconceptions. This ability, I hypothesised, makes literary texts a useful tool for sensitising readers.
My analysis was guided by three clusters of literary approaches I identified, namely ‘Problematising the linguistic status quo’, ‘Proposing linguistic neutrality’ and ‘Reversing the linguistic status quo’. The central texts I evaluated in the first cluster were The Left Hand of Darkness and Häutungen. Both problematise the linguistic status quo – Le Guin’s novel queries the generic use of ‘he’ and ‘man’, while Stefan’s text questions the indefinite pronoun and the default grammatical gender. Each text highlights that male terms are unable to represent human beings equally. My application of Leibniz’s salva veritate principle supports that ‘man’ cannot be equated with ‘a human being of either sex’. Both fulfil a different function in language; one is specific and the other generic. In fact, as my etymological analysis illustrates, ‘man’ and ‘human’ used to be separate concepts; it was a shift in world view that made them interchangeable. Le Guin’s and Stefan’s literary problematisations highlight the issues with this equation.

The texts I assessed in the second cluster build on this premise and experiment with linguistic revision. The Cook and the Carpenter and Woman on the Edge of Time suggest new terms of reference to enable a more inclusive understanding. Both employ epicene nouns and pronouns – Piercy’s novel uses ‘person’ to refer to the inhabitants of a future society, while Arnold’s text employs ‘na’ in relation to the carpenter’s community. Wittgenstein’s notion ‘eine Sprache vorstellen heißt, sich eine Lebensform vorstellen’ proved valuable for framing Piercy’s and Arnold’s proposals of linguistic neutrality; a change in terminology opens up conceptual possibilities. However new linguistic practices need to become widely accepted before they can have an impact. This was confirmed by my evaluation of epicenes; many attempts to introduce an English neutral pronoun have failed. On the other hand, I also illustrated that the familiar pronoun ‘they’ has been, and continues to be, employed as a neutral alternative to ‘she’ and ‘he’. Consequently, neutral language is possible if aligned with ‘menschliche Gepflogenheiten’ – and these can certainly change, as illustrated by Piercy and Arnold.

The key texts I analysed in the final cluster, the English and German translations of Egalias døtre, reverse the linguistic status quo to highlight the extent and impact of biased terms. If linguistic practices privilege one sex/gender only, the novel shows, the other is rendered conceptually insignificant. Egalias døtre, and its English and German translations, accentuate this via female generics such as ‘Direktorinnen’ and linguistic innovations such as ‘wom’ and ‘manwom’. Brantenberg’s, and her translators’, use of wordplay is particularly effective, as illustrated by my discussion of Freud’s work on ‘Humor’. Freud proposes that humour enables
speakers to ridicule figures of authority and thereby experience release. While the long-term consequences of this release remain contested, the novel helps to expose the artificiality of the linguistic hierarchy. My etymological study further confirmed that male-as-norm is a historical and cultural product – *Egalias dotre* effectively brings this to the fore.

To evaluate the ability of the three approaches to raise awareness in readers, I conducted a focus group study. I asked English and German speakers to read the introductory pages of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Cook and the Carpenter* and *Egalias dotre* in their native language and focus on the employed nouns and pronouns. In particular, I prompted participants to reflect on who they imagined when reading, and discuss which text(s) they considered most effective in illustrating the issue of linguistic representation. Respondents remarked that they predominantly pictured male characters in the scene described in *The Left Hand of Darkness* – German speakers even more so owing to the male grammatical gender of the terms. In reference to *The Cook and the Carpenter*, participants reflected that they felt confused and frustrated by the neutral pronoun. In order to ‘make sense’ of the narrative, respondents stated that they replaced ‘na’ with ‘she’ or ‘he’ in line with sociocultural expectations – with German speakers additionally relying on grammar to make the distinction. When reading the English or German translation of *Egalias dotre* most participants commented that they were able to picture either sex/gender clearly. The reversal caused little concern as the created terms could be interpreted in line with the familiar pronouns ‘she’ and ‘he’.

I subsequently asked respondents to select the excerpt they considered most effective in highlighting the issue of sex/gender and language. Responses were generally split. While some participants considered subtlety a useful tool, most respondents felt that *The Left Hand of Darkness* was too understated. Outside the focus group context, participants remarked, they would not have noticed the text’s problematisation. *The Cook and the Carpenter* again provoked a mixed response; some respondents considered the linguistic and conceptual challenge presented by the excerpt a powerful means to highlight the issue. The majority, however, considered the text too confusing and frustrating to have any real impact on general readers. The translations of *Egalias dotre*, on the other hand, were deemed effective by most participants. Respondents commented that the text was both accessible and engaging. It allowed readers to reflect on the linguistic status quo through its humorous reversal and thereby effectively raised awareness of the impact of biased language. Brantenberg’s novel was therefore considered most useful by readers.
Consequences and possibilities

As my research shows, literary texts highlight the issue of linguistic representation in three distinct ways. Furthermore, as the outcomes of my focus group study illustrate, the texts raise awareness of the issue of sex/gender and language. However, as the results also highlight, the depth of engagement is directly related to the literary approach. *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Cook and the Carpenter* were both found to be lacking – one was considered too subtle, the other confusing. The English and German translations of *Egalias døtre*, in contrast, were deemed accessible and effective. Judging from participants’ responses, Brantenberg’s novel could be employed to sensitisre readers to the importance of inclusive language, whereas Le Guin’s and Arnold’s texts might additionally need a guided setting. Respondents’ estimations provide a useful insight into the excerpts’ effectiveness; however, they also give an indication of attitudes toward the issue of the linguistic representation of women and men. In effect, reader responses clearly indicate the boundaries of acceptable change. Despite the use of wordplay, the translations of *Egalias døtre* remained recognisable to readers as the reversal was linked to familiar nouns and pronouns. Consequently, Brantenberg’s novel, while subverting the linguistic status quo, did not challenge readers' binary understanding. Similarly, *The Left Hand of Darkness* reproduced the familiar sex/gender constellation linguistically. And while the text’s problematisation gave cause for concern in terms of wider effectiveness, it again did not compromise the binary conception of human beings – at least in the opening section that respondents encountered. Both excerpts reproduced the sex/gender hierarchy and therefore remained ‘readable’.

*The Cook and the Carpenter*, on the other hand, profoundly disrupted the norms of the reader’s sociocultural context. By referring to characters as ‘na’ and ‘carpenter’, Arnold’s novel set out to render sex/gender linguistically irrelevant. Readers were consequently unable to instantly categorise according to the familiar ‘she’ or ‘he’; that is, divide characters into ‘male’ or ‘female’. While most participants tried to replace the epicene pronoun in order to ‘make sense’ of the narrative, the inability to distinguish sex/gender with certainty resulted in frustration and eventual disengagement. This response is of course problematic in terms of the text’s ability to connect with general readers; however, it also exposes participants’ dependence on linguistic sex/gender. Without the categories ‘female’ and ‘male’, respondents felt lost. In effect, participants felt they ‘needed to know’ a character’s sex/gender in order to understand the excerpt. As this need was not met, they struggled to engage with the
narrative. Arnold’s novel thereby provides a telling commentary on the linguistic status quo – speakers seem unable to conceive human beings as simply people, that is, as unsexed/ungendered. Moreover, The Cook and the Carpenter revealed both the profound relevance of sex/gender and language’s central role in conveying a binary conception of human beings. By highlighting the link between language and imagination, the excerpt proved a valuable resource for discussions: it directly illustrated opportunities for and boundaries of linguistic change.

Interestingly, as part of their response, participants reflected on existing neutral terminology in either language, such as the use of ‘they’ in English and, when prompted, ‘Binnen-I’ in German. Respondents commented that these forms would be less likely to cause frustration and confusion – first, because they are already familiar to speakers, and secondly, because they are understood neutrally. Whether the use of ‘they’ instead of ‘na’ would indeed override the ‘need to know’ needs to be assessed in future research. However, current studies certainly illustrate that attitudes toward neutral language are shaped by familiarity. That is, if a term is known to speakers they seem less likely to reject it. Oriane Sarrasin, Ute Gabriel and Pascal Gygax’s 2012 research ‘Sexism and Attitudes Toward Gender-Neutral Language: The Case of English, French, and German’, for example, evaluates whether the official commitment to and promotion of neutral terms influenced speakers’ attitudes. The authors asked participants to complete a series of questionnaires and hypothesised that English speakers who have been familiar with neutral terminology since the 1970s would be more supportive in their assessment. True enough, the data confirmed that ‘attitudes toward gender-neutral language were more positive among British students … compared to Swiss students’ (Sarrasin et al. 2012, 121). It is important to remember that neutral terminology was contested in the UK context when first introduced, and, in fact, continues to be to this day. Nevertheless, the responses of British students highlight that linguistic change is possible, leading Sarrasin et al. to conclude that ‘if opposition to gender-neutral language exists, it is likely to decrease over time, as shown by the more positive attitudes held by the British students’ (Sarrasin et al. 2012, 122). That is, if it becomes common practice, neutral language can eventually become a new norm.

Another example of the profound impact of familiarity on usage is the epicene Swedish pronoun ‘hen’. Marie Gustafsson Sendén, Emma A. Bäck and Anna Lindqvist assessed the change in attitudes toward the neutral pronoun between 2012 and 2014 in their 2015 research ‘Introducing a Gender-Neutral Pronoun in a Natural Gender Language: The Influence of Time on Attitudes and Behavior’. The authors found that
‘the very negative attitudes … decreased over time’ and ‘the very positive attitudes increased’ (Sendén et al. 2015, 6). Despite strong initial resistance to the neutral pronoun – heightened by factors such as political orientation and sex/gender – ‘time was the most important predictor of the attitudes, even after controlling for various other factors’ (Sendén et al. 2015, 8). Therefore, aversion to change, including to a novel epicene, can be overcome in a relatively short time period.

Still, ‘hen’ was first introduced in the 1960s and has been used more widely since 2010; in contrast, speakers are entirely unfamiliar with Arnold’s pronoun. As such, the novel needs to be read in a guided environment in order to reach a deep level of engagement with its linguistic revision. Read on its own, as the focus group responses highlighted, it might be considered too disruptive to have a profound impact on speakers’ attitudes. However, I would argue that this is essentially the case for all three literary texts – including the translations of Egalias døtre. The reasons might be different, but major hurdles also limit a wider impact of Brantenberg’s novel. First, by belonging to the genre of ‘1970s feminist literature’, general readers are unlikely to encounter the text. Moreover, Egalias døtre and its translations are neither widely available nor listed on contemporary bestseller lists. Additionally, readers who seek out the text are likely to already subscribe to Brantenberg’s problematisation. As a result, it might only be able to ‘preach to the converted’. Consequently, even if considered the most accessible and effective by focus group participants, the text is unlikely to be read widely enough to shape attitudes toward the linguistic representation of women and men. To reach general readers and encourage in-depth engagement, I believe, one of the most useful environments for the English and German translations of Egalias døtre is an educational setting. In fact, in this environment, all three texts are valuable tools to progress debates. My own experience of employing these excerpts in secondary education provides first evidence of their effectiveness. In 2015, I designed and taught a six-week course for Key Stage 5 students (ages 16–18) that aimed to give an introduction to the issue of sex/gender and language. The course combined different approaches, such as theoretical perspectives, empirical studies and examples of general language use, to set the linguistic frame. It then dedicated one session each to the discussion of the three literary excerpts – beginning with The Left Hand of Darkness, followed by The Cook and the Carpenter and concluding with the English translation of Egalias døtre. In the final two sessions, students developed their argument on how the excerpts relate to the theoretical positions. They also explored which of
the texts they considered most effective in illustrating the issue of linguistic representation.

I taught this course at a UK state school and the literary excerpts, especially in comparison, encouraged plenty of debate. For example, some students initially felt that the use of inclusive language was no longer contested; however, when encountering *The Left Hand of Darkness* they recognised both the presented norms and their continued prevalence. Moreover, students’ mixed responses to the neutral pronoun in *The Cook and the Carpenter* highlighted concerns around unsexed/ungendered terms of reference. At the same time, the novel allowed them to consider the possibilities, and limitations, of change. In addition, the translation of *Egalias døtre* illustrated the cultural and historical origins of linguistic bias. The outcomes of this teaching experience highlighted the value of literary texts for linguistics education, in particular. Rather than being confronted with rhetorical arguments and empirical findings in isolation, students were able to engage with language-in-use and, moreover, language as an experimental space. Through this engagement, students gained a deeper understanding of why linguistic representation matters and what is at stake: disparate linguistic representation leads to disparity in imagination.

This is a valuable experience for English and German speakers of any age – language is not the preserve of linguists or official bodies but a malleable tool to express human relations. In a guided group setting, readers are able to reflect on linguistic norms and the possibilities of change. However, this experience should not be restricted to education, and higher education, in particular. In fact, it needs to reach a much wider audience for profound changes to take place. As outlined above, the literary texts discussed throughout face substantial hurdles to connect with general readers; but this is not to say that these obstacles are insurmountable. There are multiple ways in which language users can be engaged beyond formal education. First of all, debates on sex/gender and language are already part of the public realm. As an exchange over the use of ‘Studenten’ and ‘Studierende’ in a *ZEIT Campus* piece indicates (Scholz and Kerstan 2016), both opponents to and proponents of inclusive language are given public platforms. However, as media coverage also highlights, the anti-change position remains audible, to say the least – see, for example, the *Daily Express* headline ‘EU to kill off MEN: Brussels demands end to words like “mankind” and “manpower”’ (Nellist 2018). To counteract adverse viewpoints and to provide an alternative perspective, feminist linguists and activists employ a variety of formats.
Luise F. Pusch, for example, has been publishing accessible essays and ‘Glossen’ since 1984 to reach general language users; since 1998, she has also published online. Equally, English- and German-language activists create zines, write blogs and contribute to online forums to present their pro-change arguments.

I believe these existing channels could help to bring literary texts to a wider audience. For example, blogs could publish excerpts from The Left Hand of Darkness, The Cook and the Carpenter and the translations of Egalias døtre, and also more recent texts such as Ann Leckie’s 2013 award-winning novel Ancillary Justice. The excerpts could be framed with questions, such as ‘Who did you imagine when reading the text?’ and ‘Why did you imagine a particular person?’, to encourage readers to engage more deeply. Publications could additionally be linked to an online forum to allow readers to exchange ideas, or they could advertise reading groups to bring language users together to explore the excerpts’ impact and implications. This could help to reproduce the guided reading environment of my focus group study and raise awareness more widely. I am encouraging readers to discuss the above texts via my research blog ‘A Little Feminist Blog on Language’ (Luck 2018). The aim of the blog is to publicise literary texts thematising sex/gender and language more widely and to get further feedback on whether and how they are useful tools to sensitise readers. Another option could be an official drive to encourage language users to engage with texts such as The Left Hand of Darkness, The Cook and the Carpenter and Egalias døtre, and its translations. A 2015 Swedish campaign, led by the Swedish Women’s Lobby and publisher Albert Bonniers, distributed a copy of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s essay We Should All Be Feminists to every high-school student. The aim was for Adichie’s text to ‘work as a stepping stone for a discussion about gender equality and feminism’ (Flood 2015, n. pag.). Similarly, via a public programme, Le Guin’s, Arnold’s and Brantenberg’s texts could be made available to English- and German-speaking students to stimulate discussions. Associated reading groups could encourage in-depth reflection.

However, such initiatives still potentially exclude a wider audience. For example, feminist blogs are usually sought out by readers who already prescribe to the presented viewpoints. Equally, official campaigns, such as the one conducted in Sweden, are likely to predominantly reach speakers of a certain background and education – if they are restricted to high-school students. Consequently, the texts would be unable to fundamentally sensitise all readers and thereby effectively promote inclusive language use. The literary problematisation of sex/gender and language might therefore have to be presented more
accessibly to begin with. To address this hurdle two avenues seem particularly fruitful: first, the English and German translation of *Egalias døtre*, in particular, could be adapted for film or TV in order to connect with adult speakers, and secondly, children’s and young adult fiction could be employed to raise awareness from a young age. The satiric tone of Brantenberg’s novel renders it a valuable resource for visual adaptation. As film and TV typically reach a much larger demographic than literary texts, it could play a profound role in sensitising speakers. A potential downside is of course the high cost associated with film production; however, an online series could circumvent this issue. Furthermore, when effective, online resources are widely shared – the short film *Majorité Opprimée* by Eléonore Pourriat is a good case in point. Like *Egalias døtre*, the film illustrates a reversal of the linguistic (and social) status quo. Moreover, the English version, *Oppressed Majority* (2014), attracted 12.5 million viewers in the first two years of its release. A short adaptation of *Egalias døtre* could potentially reach a similar number of viewers. The novel could be advertised alongside to encourage deeper engagement; in effect, the film could function as an introduction to the novel, which would be likely to be read by a much wider audience as a consequence. Again, associated forums and reading groups would allow speakers to engage more deeply with the issue of linguistic representation.

Children’s and young adult fiction have even more potential for sensitising readers to the importance of inclusive language. By shaping understanding from an early age, this literature could provide the basis for broad linguistic change. Just as children are trained to learn the dominant norms – Wittgenstein terms it ‘Abrichten’ (Wittgenstein 1998, 4) – they can equally acquire a different point of view. On the one hand, a simplified version of *Egalias døtre* could familiarise children with the notion that both language and sex/gender roles are cultural constructs. On the other, existing storybooks such as Andrea Beaty’s *Rosie Revere, Engineer* (2013), enable children to imagine a girl in a historically ‘male’ career, while Tanja Abou’s *Raumschiff Cosinus: Der Bordcomputer hat die Schnauze voll* (2011) avoids sex/gender-specific nouns and pronouns to allow for a neutral conception of characters. Exploring and discussing these books with parents and in classrooms would allow children to develop a more inclusive understanding. As a result, children would grow up to become more flexible and tolerant thinkers, and therefore more receptive to inclusive language. But it is not only early exposure that can have a profound effect; young adults are also open to new understandings. Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008, 2009, 2010),
for example, has captured the imagination of teenagers. By challenging what girls can and cannot do, *The Hunger Games* is presenting an effective counterpoint to the status quo. The trilogy also addresses the implicit norms of language; that is, the assumption that concepts such as ‘leader’ are linked to ‘he’ not ‘she’. The mass appeal of texts such as Collins’ novels holds a powerful potential for promoting inclusive language use.

A shift in usage and attitudes is crucial to move forward. Norms have changed throughout history, and while male-as-norm remains a remnant of a former understanding, society is progressing toward a more inclusive picture of humanity. Language can, and must, express this shift to reflect and reinforce this new conception. As empirical research shows, changing the linguistic status quo is paramount, as language and imagination are closely interlinked. That is, if only ‘men’ are mentioned, speakers imagine predominantly ‘male’. Literary texts effectively illustrate this bias but also provide suggestions for alternatives. Making them more widely accessible, particularly in guided educational or reading group settings, can contribute to sensitising readers and thereby further promote inclusive language use. However, that is not to say that all kinds of revision are helpful at this stage. For example, I believe that as long as the premise male-as-norm remains prominent, neutral terminology will be interpreted accordingly. As my focus group study illustrates, neutral nouns and pronouns continue to be categorised according to sex/gender, and moreover in line with social and grammatical expectations. In the current sociocultural context, female visibility is therefore key to undermining androcentric interpretation. My understanding of inclusive language therefore means addressing both sexes/genders specifically. Linguistic strategies, such as mentioning ‘she’ and ‘he’ in conjunction with personal nouns and extending German terms with the suffix ‘-in’, are consequently crucial to ensuring women’s conceptual availability.

However, inclusive language presents challenges as well as opportunities. While split forms, such as ‘Direktor/Direktorin’ or ‘carpenter, she or he’, or female generics, such as ‘Direktorin’ or ‘woman’, can be argued to address both sexes/genders, they also raise concerns. First of all, split forms ensure that each sex/gender is specifically mentioned, while the generic use of female nouns and pronouns is shorter and therefore more economical. But at the same time, these very advantages present issues: split forms are lengthier, while female generics predominantly evoke one sex/gender. In writing, the length of terms might be negotiable; however, in speech, shorter terminology is often preferred. And while this might speak for female generics, the issue of bias remains – ‘Direktorin’ might be linguistically inclusive of ‘Direktor’;
however, it undeniably evokes ‘woman’ more than ‘man’. Nevertheless, the use of female generic terms has a valuable shock factor; as the English and German translations of *Egalias døtre* effectively illustrate, reversing male-as-norm has a powerful impact. When confronted with gynocentric language, speakers are prompted to realise both the extent and implications of linguistic norms – female generics can therefore be a useful strategy to raise awareness. On the other hand, using split forms is most egalitarian; both sexes/genders are named and therefore visible. However, not only naming is paramount; the positioning of each sex/gender is equally important. That is, alternating between ‘Direktorin/Direktor’ and ‘Direktor/Direktorin’ or ‘carpenter, she or he’ and ‘carpenter, he or she’, is equally crucial to undermining the notion of ‘default male’.

While alternating split/pair forms is my preferred choice, two key concerns remain for the German language. In particular: the implications of the suffix ‘-in’ and potential slippage into male generics. First of all, the suffix signifies female deviation – as terms are created by extending male nouns with ‘-in’, it enshrines male-as-norm. This problematises the use of existing female terms altogether. On the other hand, however, speakers are familiar with suffix-creations, and as studies show, familiarity is the first step toward linguistic change. In a sociocultural context where wider change is slow at best, a compromise might be needed to move forward. As female nouns and pronouns are becoming more commonly placed next to male terms, a more thorough revision might eventually take place. However, split forms are still far from common practice and speech economy remains a key hurdle to change. I myself am much more successful at writing than at speaking inclusively in German – I frequently slip back into male generic terms in speech both out of training and convenience. I am aware of the impact and attempt to correct slippages whenever possible; however, I lack consistency. Nevertheless, I believe it is this awareness, in addition to familiarity, that is paramount for any fundamental revision to take place. Employing alternated split forms, even if not consistently, is the first step to wider change. Once speakers, myself included, get into the habit of employing inclusive terms, they are more likely to persevere.

This is not to say, however, that my ambitions for linguistic change are guided only by pragmatic considerations. In fact, my ambition for the long term is a truly inclusive language – one that no longer categorises between ‘women’ and ‘men’. Terms would be economical and representative at the same time because sex/gender would no longer be relevant to
understanding. In this future language, human beings would simply be referred to as people; that is, neutrally. Both The Cook and the Carpenter and Woman on the Edge of Time provide useful illustrations of this potential. However, this new conception of humanity need not be a preserve of a future world only – as Wittgenstein proposes, imagining new linguistic practices enables imagining a new way of life. However, these new practices need to become commonly accepted to result in any profound revision. Current sociocultural norms remain informed by the sex/gender binary, and therefore any different conception of human beings inevitably remains contested. This is illustrated in Piercy’s and Arnold’s narratives, highlighted by the general rejection of neutral terms by focus group participants, and confirmed by persisting verbal and physical attacks on people who do not conform to the sex/gender binary. Nevertheless, it is the suggestion of a new language that allows for the very imagination of a new form of life to begin with. Consequently neutral, or non-binary, terms are crucial for pushing the boundaries of what can be said and what can be imagined. I believe inclusive and neutral language should therefore function in tandem – women need to be named to be linguistically and conceptually visible, but at the same time, neutral terminology will allow speakers to eventually move away from the restrictions of binaries. Alternating between ‘carpenter, she or he’ and ‘carpenter, they’, I believe, will help to open speakers’ minds to both inclusive linguistic representation and linguistic neutrality. The same applies for the German language – employing forms, such as ‘Tischlerin und Tischler’, as well as the ‘Genderstern’ [gender star], as in ‘Tischler*in’, can help to open up our conception of the sexes/genders and challenge a binary understanding.

Literary texts can contribute to sensitising readers in a profound way. As I have shown throughout this book, the texts provide a fruitful experimental space in which to explore the issue of linguistic representation. The Left Hand of Darkness and Häutungen illustrate the extent and impact of male generic terms; The Cook and the Carpenter and Woman on the Edge of Time frame discussions around language’s role in creating and reinforcing binaries; and Egalias dotre, and its translations, highlight the link between linguistic practices and world view. In combination, the three approaches make the case for why inclusive language matters and thereby effectively promote change. This is particularly valuable in the context of education – literary texts help to bring theoretical arguments and empirical evidence to life. Moreover, fiction provides an immersive counterpoint to the position that grammar and sex are separate entities and that the issue of sex/gender and language is irrelevant. By engaging
readers, literary texts can sensitise them to why linguistic change is necessary. Additionally, readers’ desire to immerse themselves encourages them to reflect on perspectives they might otherwise reject – literary texts therefore enable a more open discussion of the linguistic representation of women and men. Furthermore, through the experiments presented by authors, readers are prompted to consider the possibilities and limitations of linguistic change. As the authors discussed in this book highlight, language is neither a fixed nor abstract entity. ‘[E]ine Sprache vorstellen heißt, sich eine Lebensform vorstellen’ (Wittgenstein 1998, 8), that is, a change in language allows speakers to arrive at a different understanding of reality. Literary texts enable readers to see linguistic norms in a new light and imagine alternatives. However, to be effective literary texts need to reach a larger audience. To do so, guided reading in both educational and activist settings is most fruitful. In these contexts, especially if widely implemented, literary texts can engage readers with the issue of sex/gender and language, and sensitise them to why linguistic change matters.

Future research

The research presented in this book could be built upon in four ways. First, researchers could test whether the three clusters of literary approaches I identified are able to encompass more recent writing or need to be extended. Secondly, they could investigate the ability of other forms of writing to sensitise readers to the importance of inclusive language use. Thirdly, they could expand my focus group study to test the emerging core category, ‘needing to know’ sex/gender, as well as measure the short- and long-term impact of the texts. And fourthly, researchers could assess the impact of reading and discussing the whole texts in a reading group setting.

Literary approaches to the linguistic representation of women and men are not confined to the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, writers continue to engage with the issue of sex/gender and language to this day. One focus guiding future research, for example, could be how more recent texts confirm and expand the clusters I identified throughout this book. Three useful literary texts are Barbara Köhler’s 1999 Wittgensteins Nichte, Leslie Feinberg’s 1993 Stone Butch Blues and Ann Leckie’s 2013 Ancillary Justice. Köhler’s texts problematise the German linguistic status quo akin to Häutungen, Feinberg’s novel challenges linguistic binaries in a similar vein to Arnold’s, and Leckie’s text employs female generics
comparable to those in *Egalias døtre* – at first instance these texts could therefore be argued to fit into the clusters I identified. However, two issues emerge from the outset. First, the above differ profoundly from the ones evaluated in this book. Köhler’s work consists of essays, rather than perspectival narrations. *Stone Butch Blues* and *Ancillary Justice* do not engage as thoroughly with disparate linguistic representation as Arnold’s and Brantenberg’s texts. Additionally, of the three, only *Wittgensteins Nichte* broadly corresponds with the approaches employed in the cluster ‘problematising the linguistic status quo’. *Stone Butch Blues* is concerned with exploring linguistic liminality rather than neutrality. Jess Goldberg, the novel’s protagonist, employs the noun ‘he-she’ (Feinberg 1993, 7) and explains, ‘I didn’t feel like a woman or a man’ (Feinberg 1993, 143). Consequently, the text pushes the boundaries of ‘proposing linguistic neutrality’, potentially leading to the creation of a new category altogether. Equally, *Ancillary Justice* is not an outright reversal like Brantenberg’s; Leckie’s novel additionally problematises the sex/gender binary. ‘She was probably male’ (Leckie 2013, 3), the protagonist Breq remarks in reference to another character. Again, this extends, if not surpasses the cluster ‘reversing the linguistic status quo’. New clusters emerging from such a study could consequently be employed to revise or extend my framework for categorising literary texts thematising the issue of sex/gender and language.

The second focus for future research could be to investigate the ability of other types of writing – online pieces in particular – to sensitize readers. Today, many speakers engage with social media to inform themselves about issues and gain new perspectives. Equally, activists and linguists participate in discussions to share their views and shape debates. For example, Luise F. Pusch and Deborah Cameron write blogs to connect with language users. Blog posts are both accessible and often widely read; Cameron’s blog, ‘language: a feminist guide’, has over 7,000 followers to date. And while statistics are not as readily available for Pusch’s blog, ‘Laut & Luise’, she has been blogging since 1998 and is well known because of her public stature. Activists also use social media to communicate their views and ideas. They publish via blogs, such as ‘Gender Neutral Pronoun Blog’ and ‘Frauensprache’, and Twitter accounts. Potential resources are therefore plentiful and diverse, and researchers could investigate whether online pieces are as, or even more, effective than literary texts in illustrating the issue of linguistic representation. From my own experience of writing a blog, online outlets, whether fictional or non-fictional, allow a more explorative space than other publications. First, authors are able to self-publish and therefore
circumvent gatekeepers; allowing writers to present works-in-progress. Secondly, blog posts can be any length; authors are able to publish short experiments as well as longer pieces. And thirdly, blogs are interactive; therefore enabling readers to directly comment on their understanding of a text. Studies could investigate whether or not the above contentions are borne out by evidence.

A third potential focus could be to test the emerging core category of my focus group study, ‘need to know’ sex/gender. Researchers could reproduce or adjust my materials and procedures to undertake further theoretical sampling. Taking my four subcategories as the frame, 1. ‘perceiving sex/gender clearly’, 2. ‘perceiving sex/gender as helpful’, 3. ‘having doubts about sex/gender’ and 4. ‘potentially perceiving no sex/gender’, it would be fruitful to evaluate whether these hold up to scrutiny or need revision. Future studies could explore, in particular, why readers experience the ‘need to know’ and what the consequences are of not knowing. Additionally, researchers could assess the different strategies readers employ to satisfy the ‘need to know’ and whether or not, and why, readers are willing to accept inclusive/neutral alternatives. Another useful empirical avenue could be to assess the short- and long-term impact of the literary texts on readers’ attitudes and usage. Questions guiding such research could be, ‘Are speakers more likely to use inclusive language after encountering a literary text?’; ‘Do literary texts continue to shape speakers’ attitudes two weeks later?’; ‘If so, why?’; ‘If not, why not?’. ‘The Inventory of Attitudes Toward Sexist/Nonsexist Language – General (IASNL-G)’ could be employed to collect responses before and after the study, and evaluate any shift. This could provide a valuable quantitative extension to my research and illustrate the value of literary texts statistically.

Finally, it would be valuable to assess the impact of reading one, or several, of the texts in a reading group setting. This would provide the opportunity to engage further with each literary approach and reflect on its implications. Questions might be ‘How do reader responses compare to the above focus group setting?’ and ‘Do readers respond differently to The Cook and the Carpenter when they encounter the novel as a whole?’. Expanding on the educational potential of literary texts proposed in this book, scholars could also assess whether and how the novels can help to support pedagogic aims. It would be particularly interesting to conduct research with diverse groups of readers as well as with speakers who hold supportive, neutral and negative attitudes towards inclusive language. As suggested, a guided context will be required to make discussions most fruitful, especially as certain readers might be disinclined
to engage with the texts from the outset. Careful framing of the study will therefore be necessary. However, the results could provide valuable further evidence for whether and how literary texts can sensitise readers and promote inclusive language use.

This book presents solid foundations for future interdisciplinary research. I have illustrated the merits of fiction for linguistics education and the usefulness of social research methods in literary research. I have shown from a linguistic and philosophical perspective that literary texts effectively engage with the linguistic representation of women and men. My focus group study provides clear empirical evidence; reader responses illustrated that fiction encourages speakers to reflect on dominant linguistic practices and, moreover, to consider alternatives. However, responses also highlighted that any reflection is directly linked to the linguistic status quo. Neutral terms of reference were deemed unimaginable because linguistic and conceptual norms depend on the binary female/male. Additionally, the presented terms were unfamiliar to readers. Linguistic change is therefore bound by what speakers consider ‘possible’ and what has been considered ‘possible’ so far. However, as I have also shown, what is possible is always subject to change. By problematising and pushing the boundaries of linguistic representation, literary texts bring this to the fore and highlight that language is flexible and malleable. Furthermore, by engaging readers, perspectival literary texts prompt speakers to reflect on the possibilities, and limitations, of linguistic change. Literary texts are a powerful tool to stimulate reflection on dominant linguistic practices, and do so particularly effectively in educational settings. In guided discussions, as the results of my focus group study illustrate, they help to raise awareness of linguistic norms and prompt exploration of alternatives.

Via an interdisciplinary approach, encompassing literary, linguistic and social research methods, I have shown the sensitising potential of literary texts. In educational and activist settings, I believe literary texts can have a profound impact on shaping attitudes and usage, precisely because they ‘enable us to see that familiar reality with new eyes’ (Iser 1978, 181). On the basis of my findings, I recommend the integration of literary texts into linguistics education and activism – in particular in guided reading and discussion group environments. In educational settings readers are able to engage in depth with the issue of sex/gender and language. This engagement can help to sensitise readers and thereby prompt a wider revision of biased linguistic practices. In effect, as I show throughout this book, literary texts can promote inclusive language use.
Note

1. As discussed earlier, devising a neutral alternative for the German language is decidedly more challenging. The SYLVAIN-Konventionen point to a potential solution, albeit a more comprehensive one owing to the grammatical structure of German.