

## The Capital »I«.

### Feminism, Language, Circulation

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In 1996, Sabine Etzold of the German weekly *Die Zeit* announced that the German language was undergoing a »sex change«.<sup>1</sup> The surgeon's tool? The capital ›I‹. Known in linguistic circles as the interior majuskel or as the *Binnen-I*, this typographical character crops up to flag nouns' ability to be read as either masculine, feminine or both through their suffix, as in the singular *LehrerIn* or the plural *KollegInnen*. The construction sidesteps both the generic masculine default position of German language and the cumbersomeness of compound nouns like *Lehrer und Lehrerinnen*. The *Binnen-I* thus facilitates the print recognition of both genders in general or neutral contexts – and with typographical economy. But as Etzold's gloss of its emasculating, ›sex-changing‹ power suggests, the ›I‹ tells a story beyond any neutral description that could possibly be composed of it. It comes laden with a history of political and philosophical circulation whose power to inflame has not dissipated since 1996, despite the ›I‹'s usage in often pedestrian contexts like advertisements and public service announcements.

If Etzold's point was an acknowledgement of the ›I‹'s sometimes polemical reception, more than a decade later the ›I‹ hasn't lost its power to occasion hyperbole. As recently as 2008, German journalist Hen-

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**1** | See Sabine Etzold: »Glosse: Die Sprache wechselt ihr Geschlecht«, in: *Die Zeit* 15 (1996) n.p. <http://www.zeit.de/1996/15/gloswiss.txt.19960405.xml> (accessed 12.12.2008); this and all further translations by Susanne Luhmann.

ryk M. Broder attributed to the ›I‹ single-handed responsibility for the »feminization of the everyday«.<sup>2</sup> In the Swiss weekly *Die Weltwoche*, he swiped at the ›I‹ as the apotheosis of political correctness, the orthographical architect of a fundamentally feminine language structure that has, in turn, feminized Germany as a whole. In resistance to the ›I‹'s feminizing power, Broder posits, some German men have begun voicing support for totalitarian regimes like those in Iran and Russia. He takes wry delight in observing that neither Ahmadinejad nor Putin (unlike German men, he implies) would ever sacrifice their aggressive masculinity to such purportedly nelly duties as changing diapers. Russia and Iran figure as bulwarks against the feminizing effects of the ›I‹ in Broder's mind. From being the scalpel of a language's sex change to a chief flame-fanner of totalitarianism, that small but tall letter ›I‹ seems to have had enormous, world-changing effects. It has seemingly accomplished what many mass-movements before have been unable to achieve: anarchy.<sup>3</sup>

How did the rise of the ›I‹ garner such overdetermined press? And, perhaps more importantly, to what end? Unlike many of the other punctuation marks being discussed in this book, the *Binnen-I* has not accrued its ideological or philosophical weight through circulation in philosophy itself (although some philosophers do use it). It does not carry with it a history in philosophy so much as it carries a philosophical history of usage. On the back of the ›I‹ is a surprising and sometimes even unpredictable history of language circulation that offers fascinating insights into print manifestations of feminist thought in German.

It may surprise some people to know, for instance, that the capital ›I‹ was not, in its earliest appearance, the brain-child of feminists. Although its use intersected with feminist theories and practices and emerged within decidedly progressive contexts, its entrée into German was rather more an accident of convenience. Moreover, its current uses are far more variable, and often quite ordinary across German-speaking contexts. It is the strange and fascinating story of the ›I‹'s cultural circulation – replete with its peculiar origins, its lingering successes and failures, and its legacy of orthographic allegiances to a wide range of speech acts – that this short essay purports to tell.

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**2** | Henryk M. Broder: »Das große I der Idiotie«, in: *Die Weltwoche* 9.10.2008, [http://www.achgut.com/dadgd/index.php/dadgd/article/das\\_grosse\\_i\\_der\\_idiotie/](http://www.achgut.com/dadgd/index.php/dadgd/article/das_grosse_i_der_idiotie/) (accessed 10.12.2008).

**3** | See Sabine Etzold: »Glosse: Die Sprache wechselt ihr Geschlecht«.

Capitalizing the »I« to include the presence of women in person-descriptive nouns emerged as a pragmatic solution to the lengthy typing out of both masculine and feminine nouns. It first appeared in a 1981 book on pirate radio stations by male Swiss author, Christopher Busch. Ironically, his explanation of the process is one many feminists might find quite sexist. With a phallic flourish, Busch describes the emergence of the large I as a »sexual maturation of the »i« and its growth into the »I« because of its frequent contact with the long forward slash.«<sup>4</sup> He was referring to the widely used »Hörer/innen«. Given the resemblance between the slash (/) and the »I«, one imagines the discovery may even have been the result of a typo. From Busch's book, the *Binnen-I* migrated either to a flyer or an ad by the Zürich Free Radio Station *LoRa*.<sup>5</sup> In 1984, it was taken up by the Swiss alternative newspaper *WOZ*, where it is still used regularly today. (Indeed, the capital »I« seems currently to be used more widely in Switzerland than in Germany).<sup>6</sup> The journalist Oliver Tomlin introduced it to the German alternative newspaper the *TAZ*, which popularized its use in Germany.<sup>7</sup> The fact that feminists came to appreciate the intervention made its circulation seem more polemical than it actually was. But it was only *after* its initial introduction that the »I« became a feminist phenomenon as its actual history of usage merged with the charged atmosphere of feminist thinking and activism at the time.

If we restore the »I« to its initial historical context, it becomes easy to understand why it has, for so long, been read as a product of feminist politics. The *Binnen-I* seems like it *ought* to have been invented by feminist linguists. In the 1970s and 80s, linguists such as Luise Pusch and Senta Trömel-Plötz made it their explicit aim to correct the masculinism of German language.<sup>8</sup> They argued that the German language

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4 | Quoted. in Ute Scheub: »Der lange Marsch« n.p.

5 | There is little agreement regarding the precise details of this history. See U. Scheub: »Der lange Marsch« but also Häberlin, Susanna/Schmid, Rachel/Wyss, Eva Lia: »Übung macht die Meisterin«, München 1992, p. 93.

6 | See Alan Scott: »Land der DichterInnen und DenkerInnen? A linguistic analysis of the controversial suffix -In«, in: German as a Foreign Language Journal (GFL) 2 (2006), p. 3.

7 | See Oliver Tomlin: »Ein Zeichen erfreulichen Eigensinns«, in: *TAZ* 11.9.2004. <http://www.taz.de/index.php?id=archivseite&dig=2004/o9/11/a0324> (accessed 30.12.2008).

8 | See Luise Pusch: Das Deutsche als MännerSprache. Aufsätze

with its use of the generic masculine does violence to women by tacitly creating a language-world in which women were not represented. They agitated for language reforms that would departriarchalise language – and society along with it. The underlying assumption of Pusch and Trömel-Plötz's thinking – one shared also by many poststructuralist thinkers – is that language determines and shapes reality. Changing language could, in turn, change society. To the extent that its detractors up to and including Broder believe that the ›I‹ helped to feminize the German language and Germany, they locate it in this tradition of feminist linguistic thought.

Indeed the feminization of language, if not of life altogether, as writers like Broder diagnosed and feared, is precisely what the fuss about feminist linguistics was all about. But the ›I‹ was not among the strategies feminist linguists proposed for feminizing the language (which is not to say that they failed to appreciate its effects). Pusch's program for the feminization of German involved no making of compound or fused nouns: she suggested a generic feminine should simply replace the masculine generic.<sup>9</sup>

Ironically enough, it was only in the wake of the ›I‹'s entrée into the popular press that the generic feminine also got its foot in the door of print culture. On September 11, 1987, for one day only, Pusch and colleague Thérèse Flückiger co-edited an issue of the Swiss *WOZ*, in which they used the generic feminine almost exclusively. The issue generated heated discussion among the staff concerning when exactly to use the generic feminine for this issue and when to demur. The lead article featured vigilante committees and civil militias, which was not feminized so as not to ›ridicule‹ this important topic. The choice not to implement the generic feminine for an article on the South-African musician Lois Moholo also generated controversy after the issue's publication. The article stood out for having more generic masculine nouns, which the staff defended because it had been translated from the relatively gender-neutral English. But using the generic and specific masculine made this Black musician look rather sexist. Wild debates ensued among the *WOZ*'s readers.<sup>10</sup>

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und Glossen zur feministischen Linguistik, Frankfurt/Main 1984; Senta Trömel-Plötz: Frauensprache. Sprache der Veränderung, Frankfurt/Main 1982.

**9** | Luise Pusch: Das Deutsche als MännerSprache, p. 47.

**10** | See Edith Krebs: »Alles halb so wild«, in: Die Wochenzeitung (WOZ) 2.3.2006. <http://www.woz.ch/artikel/inhalt/2006/nr09/Kultur/13012.html> (accessed 9.1.2009).

That the generic feminine also made its way into public institutions speaks to the power of feminism at the time. To much outcry from the press, the issue was taken up by the city parliament of the Swiss town of Wädenswil in 1993. The city even proposed an ordinance to institutionalize the use of a generic feminine.<sup>11</sup> *Bürgerinnen* was supposed to also include *Bürger* – but it did not pass. The northern German city of Eutin also used the generic feminine in 1998 (although the practice was abandoned after two months).<sup>12</sup> In light of feminist linguistic critique of the generic masculine, it seemed to some that the »I« was one way out of such controversies and impasses that seemed to require recognizing either the masculine or the feminine as generic. The »I« thus came to be understood as a gender equitable solution to the standard but exclusionary generic masculine.

## Standing Tall For and Against the »I«

The »I«'s implementation was greeted with open arms by feminists but with skepticism by grammarians. It met the concerns of feminist linguists, who had three major claims against the generic masculine: that it reinforced outdated ideas of gender inequality; that it was confusing because its use made it difficult to tell whether a noun included women or referred exclusively to men; and that it rendered women invisible and thus less thinkable.<sup>13</sup> (The latter claim has since been substantiated in several empirical psychological studies.)<sup>14</sup> The »I« gained an acceptance among feminists as well as pragmatists. Other solutions to the problems posed by the generic masculine were proposed but found

**11** | Ann Peyer/Eva Lia Wyss: »JazzmusikerInnen weder Asketen noch Müsli Fifis.« Feministische Sprachkritik in der Schweiz. Ein Überblick, in: Gisela Schoenthal (Hg.), Feministische Linguistik – linguistische Geschlechterforschung: Ergebnisse, Konsequenzen, Perspektiven, Hildesheim 1998, p. 126.

**12** | See Okamura Saburo: »Wädenswil und Eutin: Wie das generische Femininum kam und ging«, in: Waseda Global Forum 1 (2005), pp. 47-59.

**13** | See for example, Marlies Hellinger: Kontrastive feministische Linguistik, Ismaning 1990; Luise Pusch: Das Deutsche als MännerSprache; Senta Trömel-Plötz: Frauensprache. Sprache der Veränderung.

**14** | Dagmar Stahlberg/Sabine Sczesny: »Effekte des generischen Maskulinums und alternativer Sprachformen auf den gedanklichen Bezug von Frauen«, in: Psychologische Rundschau 52: 3 (2001).

wanting by feminists (such as the inclusion of a footnote stating that the generic masculine should be understood also to reference women, the use of a bracket, *Sänger(innen)*, or the forward slash dash, *Tänzer/-innen*.) While these other solutions conformed with the language rules stipulated in the »Duden« (unlike the capital ›I‹), guidelines for gender-equitable language rejected both variations on the basis that they both mark the *secondary* status of women.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile dissent also mounted. Opponents of the capital ›I‹ argued that it was not just aesthetically displeasing but orthographically incorrect. The ›I‹ has never garnered the support of the »Duden« team and thus does not conform to either the old or the new language rules. Others advanced the argument recently reprised by Broder: that the ›I‹ effectively leads to a feminization of language, particularly in its spoken form. Because of the perceived difficulty to speak the capital ›I‹ and thus *not* make it sound like the purely feminine form, opponents argue that errors occur easily, particularly in the process of transcribing speech to writing. Listening, transcribing or proofreading errors thus lead to a complete feminization. A case in point for this argument is the address given by the president of the University of Oldenburg to incoming students in 1995. In its published form, probably due to a printing or copyediting error, *AbsolventInnen* had become *Absolventinnen* und *LehrerIn* had turned into *Lehrerin*.<sup>16</sup>

Proponents of the ›I‹ reject these rejections. To them the aesthetic and orthographical argument against it seems without ground in the face of widely used interior capitalizations in commercial product names (such as *BahnCard* or *PostGiro*). They also point to the historical precedent of interior capitals in Baroque German.<sup>17</sup> The denial of orthographical legitimacy of the ›I‹ seems particularly curious since the »Duden's« editorial team does accept its alternatives, such as the word-internal bracketed *Kolleg(innen)* or the forward slashed and dashed *Verkäufer/-innen*.<sup>18</sup> *Neither of these ›acceptable‹ forms of gender inclusive language is any more aesthetically pleasing than the Binnen-I* and the

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**15** | See for example Donau-Universität Krems (Hg.): »Leitfaden für geschlechtergerechtes Formulieren«, Krems n.d., [www.donau-uni.ac.at/imperia/md/content/frauennetzwerk/leitfaden\\_fr\\_geschlechtergerechtes\\_formulieren.pdf](http://www.donau-uni.ac.at/imperia/md/content/frauennetzwerk/leitfaden_fr_geschlechtergerechtes_formulieren.pdf) (accessed 9.1.2009), p. 6.

**16** | Sabine Etzold: »Glosse: Die Sprache wechselt ihr Geschlecht«.

**17** | Gerhard Müller: »Die großen Buchstaben sind nur für das Auge«, in: Der Sprachdienst 35 (1991), p. 84.

**18** | See Birgit Eickhoff: »Gleichstellung von Frauen und Männern in der Sprache«, in: Sprachspiegel 55 (1999), pp. 2-6.

point stands that these constructions secure the representation, some would say the dominance, of the masculine and keep the feminine form securely in its (secondary) place.

## Failures and Semi-Successes

Despite the high-stakes rhetoric of its proponents and detractors alike, the *Binnen-I*'s effects on German language have actually been quite modest. The interior ›I‹ might not have lost its provocative power for those like Broder, but it seems to have installed itself most successfully in only the most mundane and pedestrian discursive contexts: want ads, brochures, and the language of localized public administration. In short texts, such as job ads and email messages, the ›I‹ has arguably found its most secure place. A note pinned to a small town message board might announce a sports club's search for additional *VolleyballerInnen*. In newspaper ads where every letter costs money, the opening of a position as *GeschäftsführerIn* saves money. The ›I‹ has also had successful, if short-lived, runs within public administration and governmental institutions, mostly in those of the Social Democratic and Green persuasions. For example, the ›I‹ became government policy in the Berlin Senate during the days of the Red/Green coalition in 1989. It was introduced for all Senate communication under the watch of the (male) Senator for Internal Security (on the urging of then-Senator for Women, Anne Klein). The person who raised the protest against this language reform was then-CDU politician Hanna-Renata Laurien. In an official inquiry she asked whether the »Duden« was no longer the measure of correct German but had been replaced by the fans of the Green and Alternative parties.<sup>19</sup> Of course the successor conservative CDU-Senate abolished the use of the ›I‹.

In 2005, the Austrian city of Linz, to much media attention, decided to install a hundred new street signs that would use the *Binnen-I* (for example *RadfahrerInnen ausgenommen*).<sup>20</sup> Linz's administration is among those to have adopted the ›I‹ in public communication.<sup>21</sup> The institutionalization of the ›I‹ has been most widely (and surprisingly,

**19** | Ute Scheub: »Der lange Marsch« n.p.

**20** | See ORF.at news 20.07.2005 <http://oeo.orf.at/stories/46613/> (accessed 8.1.2009).

**21** | »Magistrat Linz: Anteil der älteren ArbeitnehmerInnen steigt«, press release 2.4.2008, [http://www.linz.at/presse/politik\\_verwaltung\\_top\\_news\\_38235.asp](http://www.linz.at/presse/politik_verwaltung_top_news_38235.asp) (accessed 10.1.2009).

in light of the *Duden*'s position) secured within universities and publishing houses. The manuscript guidelines for the Vienna Universitätsverlag (WUV) explicitly require gender-inclusive language and offer the ›I‹ as one of two acceptable practices – even though it breaks the new German language rules, which are also mandated in the guidelines.<sup>22</sup> The ›I‹ therefore seems to have the most currency in the most benign and bureaucratic contexts. Where brevity matters, the capital ›I‹ can deliver: a sad fate for an intervention whose putative beginnings hold hands with the goal to »de-patriarchalize« language. Where pragmatism does not govern the deployment of the capital ›I‹, its use is inconsistent at best, languishing at worst.

Regarding any more substantive interventionist power, the ›I‹ has failed. Despite its left-wing credentials, it never caught on in the GDR. Indeed, Gisela Trempelmann found that in the new German federal states it is still perceived as »West(frauen)-deutsch«.<sup>23</sup> General consensus even has it that where it had gained footholds, use of the ›I‹ is actually in decline, at least in Germany. Perhaps most damningly, at the German newspaper *TAZ*, which widely is credited with popularizing the ›I‹ in Germany in the 1980s, nobody uses it any longer. Indeed, in 2003, in a randomly selected issue of the paper, former *TAZ* journalist Ute Scheub, employed at the paper during its transition to using the ›I‹, could not find a single use of the word-interior capital.<sup>24</sup> In the wake of the Berlin Senate controversy of 1989, and given the origins of the ›I‹ in Christopher Busch's 1981 book, Scheub concluded pithily that the capital ›I‹ was »introduced by men and killed by women«.<sup>25</sup> She argues that the waxing and waning of the ›I‹ corresponds roughly with the rhythm of the gender wars: woman-friendly public administrations enacted language policies to address gender equity, but the changes in language did not redress rampant societal antifeminism. For those concerned with gender equity in and beyond language, the effects of such policies were insignificant. At best, they raised some awareness of and discussion about the role of language as a gender equity strategy.

Even the gender progressives and deconstructionists have moved

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**22** | Hinweise zur Manuskriptgestaltung und Zitierrichtlinien, Universität Wien, 2002 [http://homepage.univie.ac.at/Romantik.Germanistik/parom\\_zit.pdf](http://homepage.univie.ac.at/Romantik.Germanistik/parom_zit.pdf) (accessed 1.12.2008).

**23** | Gisela Trempelmann: »Leserinnen/LeserInnen Ost wie West. Zu Bezeichnungen und Anredeformen in den östlichen Bundesländern«, in: Gisela Schoenthal (Hg.): Feministische Linguistik, p. 42.

**24** | Ute Scheub: »Der lange Marsch« n.p.

**25** | Ibid.

on: railing against the capital »I« for not being genderqueer enough, transfolks and their supporters, for instance, promote the gap-producing underline (*Lehrer\_In*) as a signaling of gender diversity beyond the homogenizing female/male binary. Without the blessing of either the official language authorities or even of subcultural hipster enclaves, the *Binnen-I* seems to have been abandoned by all but gender-mainstream professionals still on the march through the institutions. In the online world, a program even exists for the Firefox internet browser (»Binnen-I be gone«) designed to removes the interior majuskel from all visited internet pages for the purposes of »better readability«.<sup>26</sup>

## Minding the Gap: The Legacy of the »I«

Without the cachet of endorsement from even the leftish and alternative contexts in which it was championed to begin with, the »I«, as an orthographic mark, has been left in the dust of the radical spirit out of which it emerged. And yet the linguistic idealism that popularized the »I«'s usage remains alive and well. The »I« has engendered (so to speak) a whole new wave of responses to its legacy that point to a surprising consonance of assumptions among the left and the right alike. Both the next wave of leftist language activists as well as the »I«'s persistent conservative detractors are united in their refusal of the »I«'s legitimacy, if not its efficacy. More importantly, they also share a belief that language somehow organizes social order and confers legitimacy on the phenomena it recognizes – however different their proposed alternatives to the »I« may be. A new generation of linguists has renewed calls for a return to the generic masculine, having adopted a rhetorical stance which suggests that the »I«'s and its alternative, the split *Politikerinnen und Politiker*, both constitute a form of “linguistic apartheid”<sup>27</sup> that sharpens gender differences (and thus promotes sexism).<sup>28</sup> Broder,

**26** | See »Binnen-I be gone 0.4.9« <https://addons.mozilla.org/en-US/firefox/addon/6822> (accessed 10.1.2009).

**27** | Dagmar Lorenz: »Wider die sprachliche Apartheid der Geschlechter. Anmerkungen zu einer feministischen Mode. In: Muttersprache 101 (1991), pp. 272- 277.

**28** | See for example Wolfgang Klein, director of the Max-Planck-Institute for Psycholinguistic in Nijmegen, qtd. in Ulrich Dewald: »Kontrovers: Feministische Linguistik«, in: [wissenschaft.de/wissenschaft/hintergrund/drucken/287303.html](http://www.wissenschaft.de/wissenschaft/hintergrund/drucken/287303.html) (accessed 20.12.2008).

it would seem, has some linguistic allies. Meanwhile, moving in the opposite direction, a new generation of gender and sexuality activists (the rebellious children of feminism?) are exposing cracks in the gender politics of the ›I‹ so as to increase the range of gender recognition in German language. Transgender activists reject, or at least modify, the ›I‹ for embracing, rather than questioning, gender binaries and the naturalness of a two-gender system. From the linguists, calling for a retreat to the generic masculine, to the genderqueers, moving on to the underscore gap, it would seem, to quote another newspaper headline, that »The Binnen-I has competition«.<sup>29</sup>

How this new wave of debate will settle out is not yet clear. The generic masculine has not yet re-taken hold, although it is obviously finding some sympathy in the press. Nor has the new punctuation that genderqueers are proposing settled into established convention. The status of the ›I‹ vis a vis the underscore gap remains, fittingly, indeterminate. Unlike the generic masculine, the very phenomenon of the underscore requires some explanation (which helps constitute its maverick orthographical currency). According to activist and philosopher Steffen Kitty Herrmann, the underscore gap is used »to mark a space that is not permitted in our language, a room for playful erotic lustful gender, which in our gender order cannot be. The gap in Leser\_In, Freund\_In, Lieber\_In is to build this space. Placed between the borders of a rigid order, it is the room-making gesture of the invisible, the permanent possibility of the impossibly. With this making visible, the axis of the two-gender imaginary is de-centered onto the point at which the secure feeling of normalcy is denied. It is a location of deviant and perverse genderedness.«<sup>30</sup>

What is immediately striking about Herrmann's statement is his use of the ›I‹ *alongside* the underscore gap. Herrmann's decision to capitalize the ›I‹ is not standard among genderqueers. Others more emphatically choose to return the ›i‹ to its lower-case place in »Duden«-sanctioned grammar structure.<sup>31</sup> They reject what they take to be

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**29** | »Raum für \_! Das Binnen I bekommt Konkurrenz« in: diestandard.at 26.10.2008 <http://diestandard.at/text/?id=1224776349439> (accessed 30.12.2008).

**30** | Steffen Kitty Herrmann: »Performing the Gap – Queer Gestalten und geschlechtliche Aneignung«, in: arranca! 28 (2003), p. 22.

**31** | See for example Tania Witte: »Workshop oder: Die Sendung mit der Maus«, in: Pia Thilmann/ Tania Witte/ Ben Rewald (Hg.): Drag Kings. Bartkleber gegen das Patriarchat, Berlin 2007, p.10.

the relative gender normalcy of the ›I‹, but in doing so unwittingly embrace the normalcy of grammatical order. After all, the *Duden* does permit internal punctuation for words where it does not permit internal majuskels. Herrmann's combining of the underscore gap with the ›I‹ makes a deal of a different sort with established convention in holding on to the ›I‹ whose limits it also exposes. How – or whether – the usage will become conventional is anyone's guess. (Luise Pusch, by the way, is not convinced by the gap and remains unwavering in her conversion to ways of the *Binnen-I* precisely because of its easily misread femininity.<sup>32</sup>)

Radical efforts to recognize the social configurations of gender by way of orthographical interventions may well falter by virtue of their necessary proximity to established conventions of both gender and grammar. But the extent of the success of punctual marks like the capital ›I‹ and the underscore gap should not be judged only according their widespread acceptance. The history of the *Binnen-I* illustrates that its circulation both depends upon and creates new contexts for the reconfiguration of its own meaning over time. What unites the contexts of its usage is not any consistent, persistent, or even widespread use of the orthographical mark itself. Its circulation contexts, which include its supporters as well as its detractors, are brought together by a shared belief in the power of language as a tool for social change and by a sense of urgency about the gendered nature of that change. Even those who prefer that things didn't change and those who see virtue in a retreat to the generic masculine share in these stakes. The new frontier of this language war has been engendered on all sides by the circulation history of ›I‹, which has wrought consequences that are both small and tall. And whether that circulation history can effect – or even properly represent – sex change of any kind is yet to be determined.





