

# The Role of Gender Category in Homonym Formation in the German Language

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Keywords	Abstract
German language grammatical gender homonymy lexical semantics disambiguation corpus linguistics	This study investigates the role of grammatical gender in the formation, differentiation, and stabilization of homonyms in the German language. Drawing on lexicographic sources, corpus data, and theoretical literature, the analysis demonstrates that gender functions as a key structural mechanism that enables phonologically identical nouns to maintain distinct meanings. Homonymous sets such as Band, See, and Teil show that gender provides essential morphological cues that prevent lexical merger and support semantic clarity. Diachronic evidence further reveals that gender often preserves distinctions between historically unrelated roots that have converged phonetically over time. In contemporary usage, gender agreement within noun phrases offers redundant syntactic signals that facilitate efficient disambiguation, aligning with psycholinguistic findings on gender-based lexical access. The results highlight the broader linguistic, cognitive, and pedagogical significance of gender as a central organizing principle within the German lexicon.

## 1. Introduction

Homonymy—lexical items that share identical phonological or orthographic forms but differ in meaning—represents a central topic in lexical semantics and structural linguistics. In German, homonymy is particularly noteworthy because it arises within a morphological and grammatical framework that provides multiple mechanisms for both generating and disambiguating ambiguous forms. Among these mechanisms, grammatical gender (*Genus*) stands out as a uniquely influential factor. German nouns obligatorily belong to one of three genders—masculine, feminine, or neuter—and this classification affects not only determiners and adjectives but also syntactic agreement patterns throughout the sentence (Aslanova, 2025). Consequently, gender is embedded deeply in lexical representation and processing.

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Despite a substantial body of research on German gender assignment—ranging from semantic and morphological theories to psycholinguistic models of gender retrieval—its specific role in homonym formation has been comparatively understudied (Ismayil et al, 2025). Traditional accounts of homonymy often emphasize semantic divergence, etymological convergence, or phonological reduction, yet they rarely address how gender interacts with these processes. Considering how frequently German relies on gender distinctions to differentiate otherwise identical forms (e.g., *der Band*, *das Band*, *die Band*), the lack of focused attention on this topic leaves a gap in our understanding of German lexical structure.

The German gender system contributes to homonymy in two primary ways. First, it facilitates the coexistence of multiple lexemes with identical forms but different meanings: gender acts as an additional lexical feature that prevents complete homonymic collapse (Babayev, 2022). Second, it acts as a communicative safeguard by providing morphological cues that aid speakers and listeners in resolving ambiguity during real-time language processing. These functions illustrate how homonymy in German is not merely a product of semantic evolution but also an outcome shaped by grammatical constraints.

Moreover, gender-based homonyms provide a valuable test case for broader theoretical questions about the mental lexicon. For example, if gender operates as part of a noun's core lexical specification, then homonyms differing in gender should behave as distinct lexical entries during processing (Ismayil, 2018). Conversely, if gender is treated as a syntactic feature external to lexical semantics, then homonym pairs might share more cognitive representation than traditionally assumed. Thus, the topic sits at an intersection of morphology, syntax, semantics, and psycholinguistics.

This study aims to explore these issues by examining how gender categories contribute to the formation, stabilization, and functional disambiguation of homonyms in the German language (Zeynalova & Ismayil, 2023). By analyzing representative homonymous sets and reviewing relevant linguistic theory, the paper demonstrates that gender is not only a classificatory device but also an active structural component influencing lexical architecture (Babayev, 2022). Ultimately, understanding the role of gender in homonymy deepens our insight into how German organizes meaning and form within its lexicon.

## 2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative linguistic methodology designed to identify, analyze, and contextualize German homonyms that differ primarily by grammatical gender. The methodological framework draws on established procedures in lexical semantics, corpus linguistics, and morphological analysis (Eisenberg, 2013; Lyons, 1977).



## 2.1 Data Sources

To ensure reliability and linguistic accuracy, data were collected from three primary sources:

### 1. Authoritative Lexicographic Resources:

Standard German dictionaries such as *Duden Deutsches Universalwörterbuch* (Dudenredaktion, 2020) and *DWDS – Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* served as the principal sources for identifying homonymous lexemes. These resources provide canonical gender assignments, definitional distinctions, and historical notes.

### 2. Contemporary Corpora:

Corpus examples were drawn from DWDS and, when relevant, the DeReKo corpus to observe homonyms in authentic syntactic and pragmatic environments. Corpus linguistics methodology follows guidelines outlined by Lemnitzer & Zinsmeister (2010), emphasizing naturally occurring usage across genres.

### 3. Secondary Linguistic Literature:

Scholarly works on German grammatical gender, semantic change, and homonymy (e.g., Corbett, 1991; Köpcke & Zubin, 1983; Wurzel, 1989) were used to contextualize findings and support theoretical interpretations.

## 2.2 Selection and Classification of Homonyms

The selection criteria focused on nouns sharing identical orthographic and phonological forms but differing in gender categories. Only items demonstrating clear semantic divergence (e.g., *der Band*, *das Band*, *die Band*) were included. This approach is consistent with theoretical distinctions between homonymy and polysemy described in Cruse (1986).

Each homonymous set was classified according to:

- **Gender forms** (masculine, feminine, neuter),
- **Semantic domains** (e.g., concrete object, abstract concept, collective noun),
- **Etymological backgrounds** where available, based on etymological data in Duden and DWDS.

## 2.3 Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded in three stages:

### 1. Morphological and Semantic Analysis:



For each homonymous set, gender assignment was examined for its role in meaning differentiation. Morphological paradigms were analysed following Eisenberg's (2013) framework to determine how inflectional patterns contribute to the maintenance of lexical distinctions.

## 2. Syntactic-Contextual Examination:

Contextualized examples were extracted from corpus data to evaluate how gender marking on determiners, adjectives, and pronouns contributes to disambiguation in natural texts. This stage aligns with psycholinguistic evidence indicating that gender cues facilitate lexical access (Schiller & Caramazza, 2003).

## 3. Comparative Theoretical Integration:

The empirical findings were interpreted within broader theoretical discussions about gender as a lexical feature. Works by Corbett (1991) and Audring (2019) provided the basis for assessing whether gender primarily functions as a morphological classifier or as part of lexical-semantic structure.

### 2.4 Limitations

The study adopts a qualitative approach and does not include quantitative measures such as frequency counts or statistical modeling. While corpus examples were consulted, token frequencies were not systematically compared across homonyms. Additionally, diachronic interpretations rely on secondary etymological sources rather than original historical corpora (Ulduz, 2022). These limitations, however, do not undermine the study's goal of identifying structural patterns but leave room for future empirical work.

## 3. Results

The analysis revealed several recurring patterns in how grammatical gender contributes to the formation, differentiation, and stabilization of homonyms in the German language. Findings are presented in three subsections: (1) gender as a differentiating mechanism, (2) diachronic divergence and convergence effects, and (3) syntactic disambiguation. Representative examples are included in Tables 1–3.

### 3.1 Gender as a Differentiating Mechanism

The data confirm that grammatical gender frequently functions as the *primary distinguishing feature* between homonymous lexemes. In many cases, gender is the only morphosyntactic marker separating semantically unrelated nouns, supporting claims by Lyons (1977) and Cruse (1986) that non-phonological cues often sustain lexical distinctions.

**Table 1. Common German Homonyms Differentiated by Gender**



<i>Lexeme</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Translation</i>	<i>Semantic Category</i>	<i>Source</i>
<b>Band</b>	der	volume (book)	cultural object	Duden (2020)
	das	ribbon/tape/bond	concrete object	Duden (2020)
	die	music band	collective noun	DWDS
<b>See</b>	der	lake	geographic feature	Duden (2020)
	die	sea (poetic)	body of water	Eisenberg (2013)
<b>Verdienst</b>	der	earnings/income	economic concept	DWDS
	das	merit/accomplishment	abstract value	Cruse (1986)
<b>Teil</b>	der	component/section	structural category	Duden
	das	piece/object (informal)	concrete item	DWDS

These examples illustrate that gender enables multiple lexemes to coexist without phonological differentiation—an effect discussed extensively by Köpcke & Zubin (1983) in their work on German gender categorization.

### 3.2 Gender Enables Diachronic Divergence and Convergence

Diachronic analysis of dictionary and corpus data suggests that several homonyms emerged not from semantic branching but from phonological convergence of historically unrelated roots. Gender assignment helped preserve distinctions that might otherwise have collapsed.

For example:

- **Teil** (masculine) derives from Old High German *teil* meaning “portion,” whereas
- **Teil** (neuter) developed from a later semantic generalization referring to “a small piece.”

The gender difference, already present in Middle High German, has prevented merger despite phonological identity (see Wurzel, 1989; Duden Etymology).

This diachronic layering substantiates the claim by Corbett (1991) that gender systems often preserve lexical distinctions across historical stages.

### 3.3 Gender and Syntactic Disambiguation in Authentic Contexts

German noun phrases encode gender not only on determiners but also on adjectives and relative pronouns, providing multiple cues for disambiguation. Corpus-based examples show that gender agreement reliably clarifies meaning even when the homonym appears in isolation.



**Table 2. Diachronic Development of Gender-Based Homonyms**

<i>Lexeme</i>	<i>Historical Root</i>	<i>Modern Gender</i>	<i>Modern Meaning</i>	<i>Notes</i>
<b>Teil</b>	MHG <i>teil</i> ("portion")	der	part/section	Maintained semantic specificity
	later semantic innovation	das	piece/object	Generalized informal use
<b>Band</b>	OHG <i>band</i> ("binding")	das	ribbon/tape	Older concrete meaning
	NHG <i>Band</i> ("volume")	der	book volume	Metaphorical extension in 18th c.
	English loan "Band"	die	music group	Borrowed in 20th c., feminine gender via analogy

**Table 3. Corpus Examples Illustrating Gender-Based Disambiguation**

<i>Sentence (DWDS examples adapted)</i>	<i>Target Meaning</i>	<i>Gender Marker</i>
<i>Ich stelle <b>den neuen Band</b> ins Regal.</i>	volume (book)	masculine ( <i>den, neuen</i> )
<i>Sie befestigte <b>das blaue Band</b> am Geschenk.</i>	ribbon	neuter ( <i>das, blaue</i> )
<i>Heute spielt <b>die Band</b> im Stadtpark.</i>	music group	feminine ( <i>die</i> )
<i>Der See ist im Winter zugefroren.</i>	lake	masculine
<i>Die See war heute sehr stürmisch.</i>	sea	feminine

These examples align with psycholinguistic findings that gender cues accelerate lexical retrieval (Schiller & Caramazza, 2003). Because gender is redundantly coded across the noun phrase, ambiguity is minimized even in cases where semantic context alone might be insufficient.

**Table 4. Homonymous nouns in the singular and plural**

<i>Noun in the singular</i>	<i>Noun in the plural</i>
der Leiter -leader	die Leiter -leaders
die Leiter-ladder	die Leitern-ladders
der Flur-corridor	die Flure-corridors
die Flur-lawn	die Fluren-lawns
der Schild-thyroid gland	die Schilde-thyroid glands
das Schild-board	die Schilder-boards
der Schild-shield	die Schilde-shields
der Kiefer-chin	die Kiefer-chins
die Kiefer-candle	die Kiefern-candles



Though some homonymous nouns are the same in the singular with gender difference, they differ in plural.

### 3.4 Summary of Findings

Overall, the results indicate that:

1. **Gender is a robust differentiator** that prevents homonymic collapse in numerous noun pairs and triplets.
2. **Historical developments** frequently interact with gender to maintain or sharpen distinctions between form-identical lexemes.
3. **Syntactic markers** of gender in noun phrases function as redundant cues that facilitate comprehension and reduce ambiguity.
4. Gender-based homonyms represent a *systematic* phenomenon in German rather than a marginal lexical anomaly, supporting earlier typological observations by Corbett (1991).

## 4. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that grammatical gender plays a central, systematic, and multifaceted role in the formation and maintenance of homonyms in the German lexicon. This section synthesizes the implications of these results across linguistic subfields, compares German patterns with those of other languages, and discusses how the gender system interacts with cognitive and communicative processes.

### 4.1 Gender as a Structural Mechanism Supporting Lexical Differentiation

The analysis confirms earlier observations that gender functions not merely as a morphological classification but as part of the internal architecture of the German lexicon (Corbett, 1991; Audring, 2019). The presence of homonyms distinguished solely by gender—such as *Band*, *See*, and *Teil*—demonstrates that gender operates as a lexical feature capable of sustaining semantic differentiation independently of phonological or orthographic variation.

This structural function is consistent with Cruse's (1986) argument that languages may rely on "extraphonological mechanisms" to preserve lexical opposition. In German, gender fulfills that role by establishing discrete lexical identities for otherwise identical forms. Without gender distinctions, several homonymous sets would collapse into single lexemes, greatly reducing semantic transparency.

### 4.2 Gender as a Diachronic Stabilizer of Lexical Distinctions

The diachronic examples indicate that gender often serves as a stabilizing factor in historical processes, preventing the merger of etymologically distinct roots that have undergone





phonological convergence. As Wurzel (1989) notes, inflectional morphology often contributes to maintaining contrasts over time, and gender—being a core part of nominal morphology—is particularly effective in doing so.

For instance, *Band* and its tripartite gender-based meanings illustrate how multiple lexical layers (native roots, semantic extensions, and loanwords) can coexist without conflict due to differential gender assignments. This supports the view that gender categories can absorb lexical innovations while preserving existing distinctions, thereby enhancing the flexibility and resilience of the lexicon.

### 4.3 Cognitive Implications: Gender Effects in Lexical Access

Psycholinguistic literature suggests that gender is encoded in the mental lexicon and accessed automatically during word recognition (Schiller & Caramazza, 2003; Levelt, Roelofs & Meyer, 1999). The results of this study align with this perspective: the presence of gender markers in determiners, adjectives, and pronouns provides multiple cues that help speakers and listeners rapidly identify the intended meaning of homonymous forms.

The redundancy of gender marking likely reduces cognitive load during processing. When encountering an ambiguous form such as *Band*, speakers do not rely solely on conceptual or semantic context but also on grammatical cues present in the noun phrase. This supports the argument that gender is a “predictive cue” during comprehension (Audring, 2019), aiding both native speakers and advanced learners.

### 4.4 Cross-Linguistic Considerations

The German system appears particularly conducive to gender-based homonymy because it includes three genders and exhibits rich gender agreement. In contrast:

- **English**, which lacks grammatical gender for nouns, seldom relies on morphological means to differentiate homonyms; ambiguity is usually resolved solely by context or lexical expansion.
- **Romance languages**, though rich in gender, typically only have two genders and do not permit the same degree of homonymous divergence based on gender alone. Cases such as French *le livre* vs. *la livre* (book vs. pound) are comparatively rare and often historically motivated (Lyons, 1977).
- **Slavic languages** have more productive gender systems, but homonym formation is less frequently tied to gender distinctions and more to case morphology.

Thus, German occupies a unique typological position in which gender distinctions are both numerous and structurally embedded, enabling a higher frequency and stability of gender-based homonyms.





## 4.5 Implications for Language Learning and Pedagogy

From a pedagogical standpoint, the findings underscore the importance of teaching gender as an integral part of lexical identity rather than as an add-on grammatical rule. Many second-language learners struggle with homonyms such as *der See* vs. *die See*, because textbooks often treat gender separately from meaning.

Explicit instruction that integrates gender with semantic differentiation can significantly improve learners' comprehension and production accuracy. Furthermore, awareness of gender-disambiguation strategies may help learners develop more efficient reading and listening skills, as suggested by psycholinguistic studies (Schiller & Caramazza, 2003).

## 4.6 Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides qualitative insights into gender-based homonymy, several limitations point to future directions:

### 1. Lack of quantitative frequency analysis:

Future corpus-based studies could examine how frequently each member of a homonymous set appears across genres, providing insight into cognitive accessibility and ambiguity resolution in real-time language use.

### 2. Psycholinguistic experimentation:

Eye-tracking, ERP, or reaction-time studies could clarify how quickly gender cues aid disambiguation and whether different genders (masculine, feminine, neuter) are processed differently.

### 3. Cross-linguistic expansion:

Investigating similar phenomena in other gender-rich languages (e.g., Russian, Arabic) may clarify whether the patterns observed in German represent a typological generalization or a language-specific effect.

## Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that grammatical gender plays a decisive and multifaceted role in shaping homonym formation in the German language. Through qualitative analysis of dictionary data, corpus examples, and linguistic theory, it became clear that gender is not merely a classificatory feature but an essential structural component that enables multiple lexemes to share identical phonological forms without collapsing into ambiguity (Gataillina et al, 2017). German's three-gender system provides a robust framework in which homonymous nouns such as *Band*, *See*, and *Teil* can coexist, each supported by consistent gender marking that guides interpretation in both spoken and written contexts.



Diachronic evidence further shows that gender has historically functioned as a stabilizing force, preserving distinctions between converging lexical roots and accommodating new borrowings without threatening existing semantic categories. In contemporary usage, gender agreement across determiners, adjectives, and pronouns supplies redundant cues that facilitate rapid lexical access, supporting claims from psycholinguistic research that gender is encoded in the mental lexicon. These findings also hold pedagogical implications: integrating gender more explicitly into vocabulary instruction can enhance learners' semantic precision and reduce misunderstandings.

Ultimately, the role of gender in German homonymy underscores the dynamic interaction between morphology, semantics, and cognition. By maintaining lexical clarity and supporting communicative efficiency, gender contributes significantly to the structure and evolution of the German lexicon.

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