

Language, Queerly Phrased:

A Sociolinguistic Examination of Nonbinary Gender Identity in French

Madeleine del Caño

State University of New York at New Paltz

Professor Eric Chambers

May 17, 2019

Abstract

Language, a uniquely human skill, is intrinsic to the self. Beyond its base communication purpose, language serves to shape the identity of the speakers who use it. One of the biggest examples of language defining and confining interlocutors' identities is the concept of gender. Based on a language's use of gender, speakers of that language are confined to the gender rules set forth in grammatical systems. How then can people who do not identify as male or female be recognized as legitimate if the language they speak does not accommodate for their gender identity?

This thesis aims to examine how gender variant people speak in gendered languages, first examining English, Hebrew and Japanese as case studies, then moving on to the historically rigid and regulated French. This study examines respondents' proposed solutions to the French language's lack of a non-gendered pronoun on social media to see if it is indeed possible for people to identify themselves and each other in a language that does not structurally recognize them as legitimate.

Keywords

French, Communication Studies, Linguistics, Sociolinguistics, Queer Linguistics, Nonbinary, Hebrew, Japanese, Pronouns, LGBTQ Community, Social Media, Nonbinary Pronouns

Language, a uniquely human skill, is intrinsic to the self. Beyond its base communication purpose, language serves to shape the identity of the speakers who use it. Conversely, “language is in essence the way a culture imposes a single social reality,” (Bershtling 2014) on interlocutors, meaning that the vocabulary and structure of a language establishes how its speakers can identify themselves. One of the biggest examples of language defining and confining interlocutors’ identities is the concept of gender. Bucholtz and Hall (2004) state that “the production of gender...depends crucially on ideology to render that identity recognizable and legitimate” (381). They cite the act of using either a male or female bathroom-- every time someone chooses which bathroom they use, they are replicating and enforcing the gender binary. How then can people who do not identify as male or female be recognized as legitimate if the language they speak does not accommodate for their gender identity?

This thesis aims to examine how gender variant people speak in gendered languages, first examining English, Hebrew and Japanese as case studies, then moving on to the historically rigid and regulated French. This study examines respondents’ proposed solutions to the French language’s lack of a non-gendered pronoun on social media to see if it is indeed possible for people to identify themselves and each other in a language that does not structurally recognize them as legitimate.

I. Language Use and Identity in English

Bucholtz and Hall (2005) define identity in linguistics as “the social positioning of self and others” (586). Plainly stated, Bucholtz and Hall claim that identity is a byproduct of linguistics and language use, rather than simply how an individual classifies themselves in their mind (588). In linguistic research preceding the 21st century, researchers defined and studied dichotomies such as “gay versus lesbian,” “male versus female,” or “straight versus gay” speech

with the assumption that the identities were static, unvarying and universal. However, with the third wave of feminism in the late 20th century came a new understanding of intersectionality and variation, leading to a new understanding of identity that stresses a person's agency (Davis, 2014). Third wave feminism is described by R. Claire Snyder in 2008 as being "multiperspectival" and "inclusive and nonjudgmental," allowing for more diverse perspectives outside of that of simply *women* (175). This meant that perspectives beyond those of wealthy white women were introduced to the conversation, including poor women, women of color, and gender nonconforming people. This collapsing of categories makes room for people whose gender identity is outside of the binary, thereby welcoming nonbinary people to the conversation.

To produce identity, Bucholtz and Hall put forward that a speaker uses similarity and difference to establish themselves as a part of a collective while demonstrating their distinction from other groups: "identity is the social positioning of self and other," (586). By positioning self, one has to find similarity between themselves and the group they align with, and defining the groups they do not align with as different. Similarity, or adequation, does not mandate that all speakers use the same lexicon or be identical; rather, it means that differences can be downplayed for the sake of finding a unifying element among a group (599). Simply put, the concept of "us versus them" contributes to identity through language use.

Adequation and distinction can be applied to concepts as vast as the nation state and as small as local queer communities. Bucholtz and Hall cite Adam Hodge's unpublished analysis of President George W. Bush's 2002 speech, in which he adequate Saddam Hussein, then-president of Iraq, with the terrorist group Al Qaeda. In his speech in Cincinnati, Bush groups together the phrases "September the 11th," "al Qaeda," "Iraq" and "Saddam Hussein." While the September 11 attacks were the fault of al Qaeda under the direction of Osama bin Laden of Afghanistan, Bush adequate the attack with the names Iraq and Saddam Hussein, implanting the

idea in the minds of the listeners that the two were of the same cohort and thereby justifying the future invasion of Iraq (600).

However, adequation and differentiation are much better understood in the context of smaller, often queer communities. Take the case of Barrett's (1999) research on African American drag queens, which examined how black drag queens mimic white women as a part of their performances. For example, Savannah-based African American drag queen, The Lady Chablis, refers to herself as a pregnant, heterosexual uptown white woman, despite her anatomy and appearance. She uses this phrase to evoke an image of womanhood, rather than convince the audience it is truth (321). Additionally, African American drag queens align their speech with Lakoff's concept of Women's Language defined in 1975, which is characterized by "'empty' adjectives like... *cute*," and "the intensive use of "so"," (322). By adequating themselves with white women, African American drag performers are able to create a wholly unique black drag queen lexicon.

In understanding that language use is intrinsic to the identification of self and of communities, this thesis aims to examine how people whose gender identity falls outside of the female-male dichotomy identify themselves and one another. Gender, while beginning to be understood as a spectrum, is predominantly relegated to a male-female binary, notably in Western cultures. However, many people identify as neither male nor female, or both, or somewhere in between. There are many names in this spectrum of genders, some of which are defined here by Cydney Adams of CBS News (2017):

Agender	A term for people whose gender identity and expression does not align with man, woman, or any other gender. A similar term used by some is gender-neutral.
Androgynous	Identifying and/or presenting as neither distinguishably masculine nor feminine.
Bigender	Someone whose gender identity encompasses both man and woman. Some may feel that one side or the other is stronger, but both sides are present.
Gender fluid:	A person who does not identify with a single fixed gender, and expresses a fluid or unfixed gender identity...likely to shift and change depending on context.
Genderqueer:	A term for people who reject notions of static categories of gender and embrace a fluidity of gender identity and often, though not always, sexual orientation. People who identify as genderqueer may see themselves as being both male and female, neither male nor female or as falling completely outside these categories.
Gender non-conforming	A broad term referring to people who do not behave in a way that conforms to the traditional expectations of their gender, or whose gender expression does not fit neatly into a category.
Non-binary	Any gender that falls outside of the binary system of male/female or man/woman.
Queer	An umbrella term people often use to express fluid identities and orientations.
Transgender	An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural and social expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth.

For the sake of coherency, people who identify outside of the binary will henceforth be referred to as nonbinary in this analysis.

According to the Society for the Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity, upwards of 35 percent of the American transgender community identifies as nonbinary (American Psychology Association 2015). Basing this percentage off of the Williams Institute's estimate that .6 percent, or 1.4 million American adults are trans, the number teeters around half a million Americans who identify as nonbinary (Flores et.al. 2016). Considering the amount of people outside of the trans community who identify as nonbinary, there may be a much higher amount of people who do not identify within the gender binary. At Harvard University, which alongside other American universities allows students to register their preferred name and pronouns into a database, around 50 students self-identified with pronouns other than *he* or *she* (Chak 2015). When taking into account this sample size at a single university, it becomes clear that many people see themselves outside of the gender binary even if there are few statistics to demonstrate it.

The fact that there is very little research about nonbinary people, to some researchers, is no coincidence. According to Davis, Zimman and Raclaw (2016), academic work has historically privileged studies that treat gender and sexuality as a binary (i.e. male versus female, straight versus gay). Only up until very recently, as aforementioned with third-wave feminism around the 1990s, have binaries begun to be viewed as limiting and marginalizing (1). While the authors acknowledge the simplicity and occasional benefits of studying subjects on dichotomous terms, they resolve on page four that gender and sexuality are subjective, complex, and contextually variant, as different communities have their own interpretations of social structures that may very well differ from the Western binary perspective, such as Two-Spirit people, defined on CBS News as "First Nations people whose individual spirits [a]re a blend of male and female" (Adams 2017). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that while nonbinary speakers

self-identify outside of the predominant understanding of physiology or sexuality, this does not make them incorrect. Quite the contrary, Davis et. al. (2016) recommend that academics move forward use “greater sensitivity” in future research, making sure not to mark anything that falls outside of conventional expectations as wrong (9). Additionally, Eckert (2014) states that treating identity as a binary “erases dynamics” that are integral to understanding gender and language use (529).

Considering language is one of the vectors used to manufacture identity, one of the many ways in which nonbinary people self-identity is by employing non-gendered or epicene pronouns to refer to themselves, and ask that others do the same. However, the English language lacks a third-person epicene singular pronoun. According to British Council, an English language-learning site, the English language is comprised of seven personal pronouns, each taking a subject and an object form (“Personal Pronouns,” 2013).

Form	Subject	Object
First Person Singular	I	Me
Second Person Sing	You	You
Third Person Singular (M.)	He	Him
Third Person Singular (F.)	She	Her
First Person Plural	We	Us
Second Person Plural	You	You
Third Person Plural	They	Them

The lack of an epicene pronoun in English is not without controversy. For hundreds of years, English speakers have posited different pronoun options, the first document dating back to 1792 with the Scottish pronoun “ou.” Many epicene pronouns often borrowed sounds from French, including *en*, *un/uns/one* and *le/les/lim* or (Baron). One of the most common propositions, however, was in favor of singular *they*, cited thirteen times in Baron’s chronology between 1794 to 1985 (Baron). The main argument against singular *they*, however, comes from defenders of English grammar, who state that “they” must only be used to refer to multiple bodies.

However, with the growing recognition of nonbinary speakers, American English is beginning to shift to grammatically accept variant pronouns. The American Dialect Society named singular *they* as their 2015 word of the year, the same year when the Washington Post added it to their style guide (American Dialect Society 2016). Two years later in 2017, the Associated Press Stylebook added an entry for singular *they* (Andrews 2017). The lead editor for the Associated Press Stylebook Paula Froke stated that “we offer new advice for two reasons: recognition that the spoken language uses *they* as singular and we also recognize the need for a pronoun for people who don’t identify as a *he* or a *she*,” (Andrews 2017). However, the same entry in the AP Stylebook mandates that journalists not use other epicene pronouns such as *zie/zim/zir* for the sake of clarity for readers unfamiliar with the politics of gender neutrality (Andrews 2017).

Additionally, nonbinary people have created their own lexicon of pronouns to accommodate their identity. While there are numerous pronouns used within the queer community, the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee identified some of the more common pronouns nonbinary speakers use (Figure 1).

1	2	3	4	5
e/ey	em	eir	eirs	eirself
he	him	his	his	himself
[name]	[name]	[name]'s	[name]'s	[name]'s self
per	per	pers	pers	perself
she	her	her	hers	herself
sie	sir	hir	hirs	hirself
they	them	their	theirs	themself
ve	ver	vis	vers	verself
zie	zim	zir	zirs	zirself

Figure 1

Even though there is some hesitancy from the average English speaker regarding the grammatical correctness of singular *they* or the legitimacy of pronouns like *zie/zim/zir*, the aforementioned institutional changes reflect the growing acceptance of nonbinary speakers in the English language. But the question stands: what about other languages?

II. Language Use and Identity in Other Languages

Bershtling (2014) examines how trans and nonbinary people speak about themselves and others in the heavily gendered Hebrew language. English only demands gender agreement in its third-person singular pronouns and certain suffixes, whereas Hebrew's grammatical gender not only affects these same parts of speech, but also all nouns, modifiers, and most forms of the first- and second-person personal pronouns, both singular and plural (37). Therefore, Hebrew speaking nonbinary people are faced with a much different linguistic reality than their Anglophone counterparts.

Because of the amount of gendering that occurs in Hebrew, nonbinary people are faced with a similar problem that their Anglophone counterparts experience: misgendering.

Misgendering is when someone is called the wrong pronouns, a common issue that many trans and nonbinary speakers deal with on a daily basis. Luckily, misgendering can be avoided in English when having a one-on-one conversation, considering the gender neutral nature of *I* and *you*. However, because Hebrew features gendered first- and second-person pronouns, many Hebrew-speaking nonbinary and trans speakers are consistently and constantly misgendered by their conversation partners. Because Hebrew is constrained by “obligatory morphological gender marking” (41), Hebrew speakers impart their assumptions about nonbinary people through the gender of the words they use, thereby classifying their conversation partner against their will (Bershtling).

While there is no simple way to fix the systemic issue of misgendering, nonbinary Hebrew speakers have created a few workarounds to their language’s “restrictive lexicon,” as identified by Bershtling. These include using the “inverse personal pronoun,” meaning using the pronoun that is opposite to the speaker’s biological sex. In Bershtling’s study, this often meant nonbinary speakers using masculine pronouns. Interestingly, in Hebrew alongside many other languages, the masculine form is seen as “neutral.” One interviewee, Eyal, stated that “[t]he masculine is a default mode, because in Hebrew it is considered the neutral form, the common denominator,” (42).

This brings to attention an important issue facing nonbinary people that can be often overlooked by English speakers. Because the only gendering that occurs in English is related to pronouns, there is no concept of a “neutral form,” considering the whole language is neutral, save for *he* and *she*. In many languages including Hebrew, though, the masculine form is treated as the default. However, there are workarounds to this hierarchical, patriarchal binary. Eyal, the aforementioned interviewee in Bershtling’s study did not make changes to his biologically

female appearance, wearing dresses and the color pink while simultaneously using the masculine form to refer to him, thereby emasculating the masculine language and removing the importance of his biological sex from his identity (43). Other interviewees opted to use negation words (*no*, *non*, *not*) to differentiate themselves from a cis identity, thereby adequating themselves with the queer communities in which they function (45).

While this method works for queer circles in Israel and other Hebrew-speaking communities, it is clear in reading the transcribed interviews that Hebrew does not have the same malleability as English. This assumption comes from the many loanwords that pop up in the transliterations of the interviews conducted in Hebrew. Loanwords, quite simply, are words lent from a different language. This occurs quite often in English, with expressions like “vice versa” from Latin, “Feng shui” from Chinese, and “carte blanche” from French. Interestingly, all the loanwords that appear in the interviews done by Bershtling are gender identities from English, like “genderqueer,” “homo,” and “trans(gender),” (35). This presents another workaround for nonbinary speakers: importing words from other languages that best suit them. This concept will appear again in the study of French, which also borrows and reinterprets English words in order to create an identity in a language that has no name for it.

Bershtling’s study helps to deconstruct and examine the politics of the very gendered Hebrew language in Israel. Conversely, Nakano (2016) examines the problem that arises for interlocutors in Japanese, a language that uses characters rather than an alphabet. Japanese has several gender pronouns that depend both on gender and formality. The most commonly known Japanese pronoun, *watashi* (私) is very formal, and can be used by both men and women. When speaking informally (or casually,) women can use either *watashi* or *atashi* (あたし). For men, informal pronouns include *boku* (僕) and the less polite *ore* (俺). So while 私 is seen as a

“gender neutral” pronoun, it is not a pronoun used in daily life with friends, the spaces where nonbinary pronouns are most commonly used.

In his thesis, Nakano is not studying a native Japanese speaker, rather an advanced Japanese language learner, which brings up Bershtling’s (2014) idea that language is the way a culture creates social norms. In English discourse, there does not seem to be any information regarding native Japanese people seeking a nonbinary pronoun. Rather, Nakano’s thesis focuses on Mathew, an American who coins a new pronoun for himself. In spite of the fact that Japanese has some forty personal pronouns, he was set on creating a new pronoun for himself: *ore* (俺). While the transcription in English is the same as the aforementioned masculine, impolite pronoun, the characters are different: 俺 versus 俺 (Nakano 2016:43).

This pronoun actually comes from Chinese, meaning something along the lines of “maid servant.” While it seems deprecating, the common Japanese pronoun *boku*, 僕, literally translates to slave, so Mathew was happily settled with this new pronoun. In ignoring its antiquated meaning and origin in another language, Mathew effectively re-invented and repurposed the pronoun 俺 for his own needs (Nakano 2016: 45).

Reappropriating existing words from other languages is a common solution for nonbinary speakers of languages that do not accommodate their identities. Repurposing a word and ignoring its original meaning appears in Nakano’s study, but also among French language learners trying to adapt nonbinary pronouns for themselves. However, the French language’s rigidity and authoritative nature makes gender neutrality a difficult feat, both on the institutional and social level.

III. Study Proper - French

To best understand the unique difficulties facing nonbinary speakers in French, one must comprehend the structure, grammar, and social conversation surrounding the French language.

First and foremost, it is important to understand French personal pronouns (Figure 2).

	<i>subject</i>	<i>object</i>
1s	je	me
2s	tu	te
3s. m.	il	le/lui
3s. f.	elle	la/lui
3s. imp.	on	---
1p	nous	nous
2p	vous	vous
3p. m.	ils	les/leur
3p. f.	elles	les/leur

Figure 2

Similarly to English, French features six forms of pronouns, with only the third person form featuring a masculine and feminine form. There is also a third-person singular impersonal form, *on*, which conjugates verbs like *il* (m) and *elle* (f) (Figure 2). However, this pronoun is used in forms more similar to proverbial *you*, *one*, or *we* in English, and not as an epicene third-person singular pronoun. Therefore, this pronoun is not an automatic solution for nonbinary Francophones.

One other difference from English with personal pronouns is the third-person plural form. In English, the third-person plural *they* is not ascribed gender, and therefore can be used as an epicene pronoun. In French, the third-person plural form is split, like its singular form, into the masculine and feminine, *ils* and *elles*, thereby eliminating the solution that nonbinary speakers have found in English.

Luckily, there is one element of the French language that removes a problem for Francophone nonbinary speakers: possessive pronouns. In French, possessive pronouns depend on the object of the phrase, not the subject. This means if one were to write “he loves his wife” in French, *il aime sa femme*, the direct translation back into English would be “he loves **her** wife.” Therefore, French-speaking nonbinary people do not have to find a workaround for possessive pronouns.

Unlike English, the conversation around gender does not stop at pronouns for Francophones. French, like many other Romance languages, features grammatical gender, which is completely decorrelated from biological sex and the social aspect of gender identity. For example, a pen, *un stylo*, is masculine while a table, *une table*, is feminine. This applies to all nouns in the French language, so even nonsexuated words that refer to people like *personne* (f) or *gens* (m) feature a gender marker. When these nouns are referred to with pronouns, they do not directly translate as “it” like in English, but as “he/she.” This presents a very different question to nonbinary francophone speakers: when everything from a pen to a table is gendered, how can you be the one exception to a language’s entire structure?

Nouns and pronouns are not the only gendered parts of speech. French demands gender agreement between nouns, pronouns, and adjectives. Similar to English, which has differences like “he is handsome, she is beautiful,” French has some descriptive adjectives that change form when referring to a man or a woman (*il est beau, elle est belle.*) Furthermore, the spelling of many descriptive adjectives in French changes depending on the gender of the object, even when the word remains the same. For example, to say “he is nice, she is nice” in French, the spelling changes from *il est gentil* to *elle est gentille*. This occurs in many descriptive adjectives in French, even with words as basic as “good”: *il est bon, elle est bonne*.

The reason that adjectives gain a few extra letters in the feminine form is the idea in French that the masculine dominates over the feminine. Similar to Hebrew, this means that the masculine form is seen as the “neutral” form, even though it is still inherently gendered. As a result, when speaking about a group of both men and women, one must refer to all of them in the masculine. If one were to speak about a group of friends, which switches from the masculine *ami* to *amie* in the feminine, they would only say *les amies* if the entire group was women. If their friend group was composed of one man and ten women or ten men and one woman, the group would still be *les amis* in the masculine. Again, this poses a very different conversation for nonbinary Francophones, since the word “friend” in English is inherently genderless. If every adjective is sexuated and gender identity is erased when grouped with others, how are they to render their identity legitimate and practiced in French?

Another gendered element in French comes not from pronouns, but from written verbs. In certain forms, verbs in French reflect the gender of the subject. For example, in the perfect tense of verbs that conjugate with *être*, gender and number must be reflected in the past participle. This means that when a man goes downstairs, it is written as *il est descendu*, but when a woman does, it is written as *elle est descendue*. This is reflected in all cases, regardless of the personal pronouns. If someone identifies as a man, they would say *je suis descendu* rather than *je suis descendue*. This not only creates opportunity for misgendering when writing in the second-person form, but adds another level of gendering for nonbinary people to figure out. How can they write about themselves in certain tenses if gender is implied in the verb?

One solution to these gendered problems is that of *écriture inclusive*, or “inclusive writing.” *Écriture inclusive* was the result of feminists tired of the fact that they were erased from many dialogues, with the conversation starting in 1984 when anti-sexist legislation started

to take hold in France (Timsit 2017). Take the aforementioned example of *ami*, where regardless of number, the masculine dominates over the feminine. This can potentially lead to sexist assumptions at the institutional level. When there are ten job applicants, nine women and one man, they are still grouped together in the masculine, *candidats*. This erases women from the conversation, even if they make up the majority.

According to the Timsit's (2017) article, in 2015 French publishing house Hatier published a textbook for the third-grade that used *écriture inclusive* under the recommendations from the European Institute for Gender Equality. The table of contents from the textbook shows the use of inclusive writing for numbers 15-18 (Figure 3).

11. Utiliser des outils au fil du temps	28
12. Se soigner au fil du temps	30
13. Faire la guerre au fil du temps	32
14. Se divertir au fil du temps	34
15. Les agriculteur.rice.s au fil du temps	36
16. Les artisan.e.s au fil du temps	38
17. Les savant.e.s au fil du temps	40
18. Les puissant.e.s au fil du temps	42
19. La place des femmes au fil du temps	44
20. La préhistoire	46
21. L'Antiquité	48
22. Le Moyen Âge	50
23. Les Temps modernes	52
24. La période contemporaine	54

Figure 3

Instead of grouping all farmers, artisans, scientists and heros under the masculine, the textbook combines both forms with the use of a period, which is also sometimes written as a hyphen. Taking number 17, for example, the word scientist or *savant* in the feminine would be *savante*. By adding periods in the word, it becomes *savant.e.s*, which acknowledges both men and women. The same goes for number 15, which is talking about farmers, or *agriculteurs*. In its feminine form, it becomes *agricultrices*, which is a different ending all together, rather than

just an “e” bolted onto the end. As a result, it is written as *agriculteur.rice.s*, again acknowledging and combining both forms (Figure 3).

With a language as policed as French, there is some institutional backlash towards inclusive writing. In 2017, Prime Minister Edouard Philippe’s office banned the use of inclusive writing in official government documents, and the *Academie Française*, the “highest authority” on the French language, put out a statement the same year that said “the multiplication of the orthographic and syntactic marks that [it] induces leads to a disunited language, disparate in its expression, which creates a confusion that borders on illegibility,” (McAuley 2017). Moreover, the institution said that the introduction of inclusive language put French in “deadly danger,” despite the fact that a survey conducted by Harris Interactive market alongside the research firm Mot-Clés found that up to 75 percent of French people are receptive to inclusive writing (McAuley 2017).

Because many French people are socially open to the idea of inclusive writing, this provides an opportunity for nonbinary French people to write about themselves without acknowledging one gender or the other. While inclusive writing still functions within the binary, it also provides a “neither, nor,” perspective on words, allowing people to write about themselves without a gender marker. While it is not institutionally supported from all ends, the existence of textbooks and research studies on *écriture inclusive* renders it legitimate for nonbinary French people. However, this only solves one grammatical issue. The question of pronouns still looms large for French-speaking nonbinary folks.

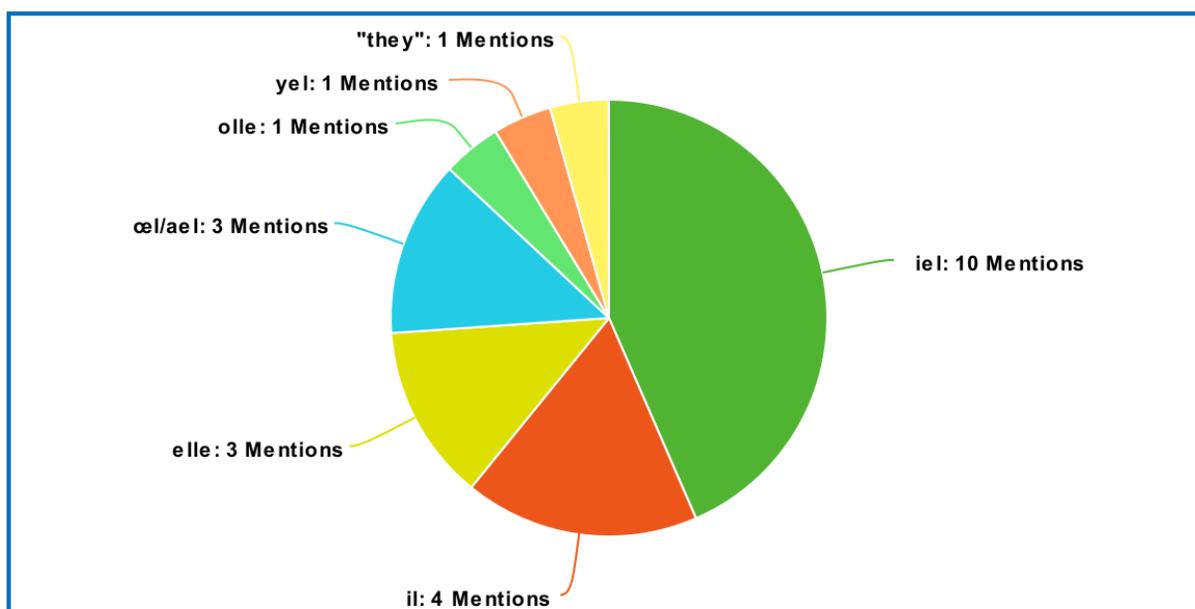
With its already strict grammar rules and the government’s distaste for inclusive writing, French does not have any naturally occurring gender neutrality. However, discussion forums on Duolingo, Quora, Reddit and Facebook have proposed pronoun alternatives. Compiling my

findings alongside the findings of two studies, “*Le Langage Dans La Communauté Non-Binaire*” (“Unique En Son Genre”) and “Innovations in Gender-Neutral French: Language practices of nonbinary French speakers on Twitter,” (Shroy), the goal of this study is to find the consensus among nonbinary French speakers and observe how they work around the constraints of gendered French.

Shroy’s “Innovations in Gender-Neutral French” sought out self-identified nonbinary Francophones on Twitter, surveying 66 people across Twitter, totaling at 287 instances of gendered pronouns. The third-person nonbinary subject pronoun that occurred the most was *iel*. a combination of *il* and *elle* used both in the singular and plural form for a total of 1,539 times across accounts (Shroy, 25).

In terms of self-identification, only 15 users specified their preferred personal pronouns in their Twitter descriptions.

Preferred Pronouns of Nonbinary Francophones on Twitter
A.J. Shroy



iel il elle œl/ael olle yel "they"

Figure 4

Two-thirds of these users self-identified as *iel*, which seems to be the most common and well-known epicene pronoun in French. Surprisingly, one user opted for the English word “they,” another example of using a loanword in a language that does not have an alternative (Shroy, 26). Additionally, seven respondents opted for the preexisting gendered pronouns *il* and *elle*, sometimes in combination with another pronoun, like *il/iel*. Five of these respondents also specified their preferred gender accord, which helps tackle the issue of gendered verbs and adjectives. Some asked for feminine accord while some specified it as “non-gendered” or “inclusive” (Shroy, 26).

“Le Langage Dans La Communauté Non-Binaire” is a study conducted by the blog Unique En Son Genre, which surveyed members of a nonbinary francophone Facebook group (Unique En Son Genre 2017). Using a Google Form, they received 286 valid responses from members of the Facebook group, also called Unique En Son Genre (5). Only 12.2 percent of all respondents used their assigned pronouns, and 8.7 percent used their assigned gender accord. Again, similarly to the results of Shroy’s study, many people identified as using several pronouns, which resulted in 56.3 percent *elle*, 54.5 percent *il* and 43 percent *iel*. Only 8.4 percent of people used *iel* as their only pronoun (8). Finally, inclusive writing was also the most popular way to write for nonbinary respondents, despite the fact that the study concluded that the use of inclusive writing continues to be very underrepresented in the general French community (1).

While both of these studies help present pronoun alternatives that nonbinary Francophones use for themselves, they do not account for the opinions of French speakers, both

nonbinary and otherwise, towards epicene pronouns. What is the perspective of Francophones and French learners towards these pronouns?

The websites examined in this study are DuoLingo, Quora, and Reddit. DuoLingo is a language-learning website, while Reddit and Quora are forums where people can ask questions about any topic. Not all forum posts started with a question, but all of them generated multiple comments and solutions. DuoLingo featured English-speaking language learners exclusively, while Quora and Reddit had both native French speakers and French language learners in the comments.

Across all three websites, there were a total of 19 pronouns proposed people in the thread.

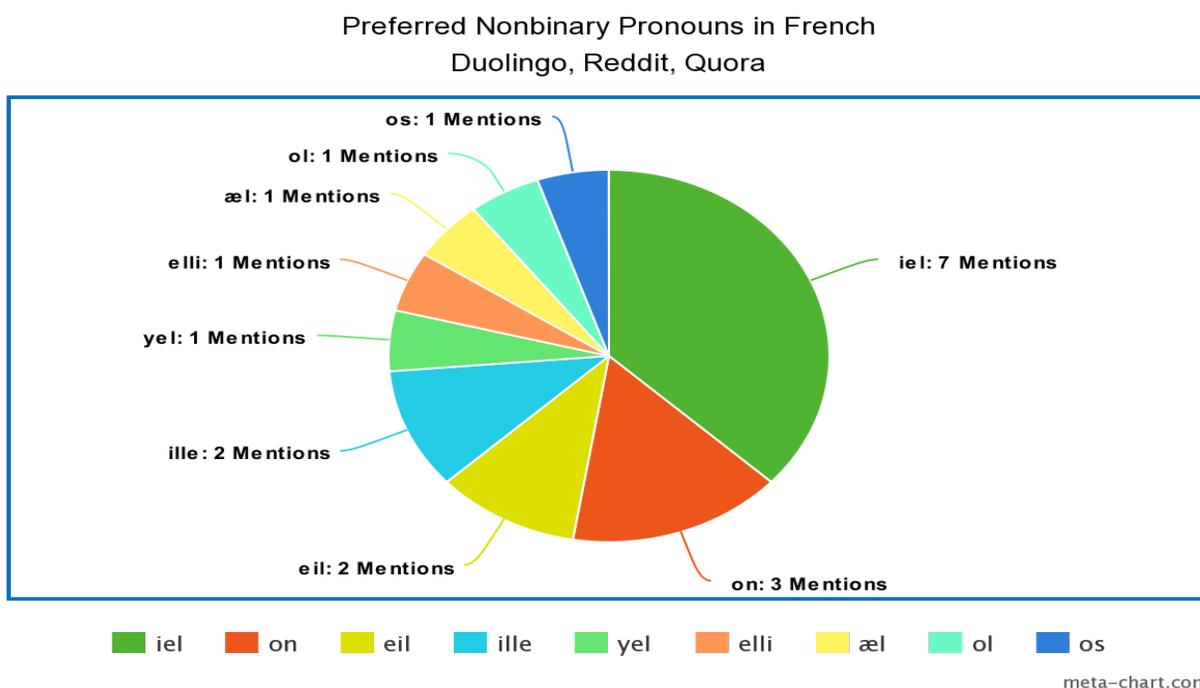


Figure 5

Again, *iel* is the most popular pronoun that people propose, alongside variants like *eil*, *ille*, and *elli*, which are all combinations of *il* and *elle*. Surprisingly, *on* is listed as a valid third-person singular pronoun, despite the fact that it is impersonal.

What piqued my interest in this study was the perspectives listed in comments. On August 18, 2014, DuoLingo user ‘thegaystripes’ started a thread called “Gender Neutral Pronouns (for Nonbinary Folks!),” in which they propose the pronouns *os/lo/sol*, *os* being the subject, *lo* the object, and *sol* the indirect pronoun. Responses include one commenter who said “these sound so un-Frenchy haha,” and another who said “i hope no one looks at me strangely if i use these haha.” “Un-Frenchy” evokes the idea of differentiation, where nonbinary pronouns are different than French, though the general attitude seems to be overwhelmingly positive. However, this is mostly because of the Anglophone community on DuoLingo. Since English is well-suited for an epicene pronoun, the adoption of one in another language seems plausible. However, differentiation as well as less positive perspectives occurs on Reddit and Quora as well.

The question prompt on Reddit was posted by user u/NSFDoubleBlue under the header “Non-Binary pronouns in French (and other languages other than English?)” on the subreddit r/NonBinary in 2018. The question reads “Does anyone know of any pronouns that are generally used in French by non-binary people, or are at least gender neutral?” Out of ten comments, two seemed to express a consensus. User u/mgagnonlv states:

None basically.

I have seen the word "iel" with a few different spellings, but to do a comparison with English, "Ze" is much more common than "iel"...

If you are in France and probably throughout Europe, I would say "use the masculine form"...

Another possibility is to use the person's name (I invited John who came – j'ai invité Jean qui est venu): no use of a pronoun. Or you say "J'ai invité Jean et cette personne est venue"; then, adjectives, articles and pronouns agree in gender with person, which is a feminine word even if the person(s) is a man.

This response is one of the most feasible without too much work. By using names and preexisting nouns, it takes the onus of gender off of the person, relegating it only to the nouns in the sentence. However, the idea of using the masculine form, as the commenter advises, could be uncomfortable for people who want to be differentiated from a masculine identity.

On the same Reddit post, user u/youdontaskaboutmayo responded:

Like another commenter, I've heard of *iel* being used. I'm in a French nb Facebook group and it seems to be the most common. As for things like adjective agreement, most people put a dot before the e (or other feminine ending), alternate masculine and feminine forms, or just pick one.

This commenter references *écriture inclusive* when they mention putting “a dot before the e (or other feminine ending),” a common tactic used by nonbinary French speakers. Additionally, they mention alternating masculine and feminine forms which is a potential solution, but once again continues to acknowledge and function within the binary. This means that while switching forms may work for some people, not everyone will be comfortable with the solution.

While no opinions are expressed forthright in the Reddit comments, there seems to be a general hesitancy towards using nonbinary language, opting instead for structures that already exist in the language. Comments on Quora, however, tend towards the most cynical perspective, mostly because the respondents are native French speakers. Without the perspective of native English, which already accommodates nonbinary identity, new structures seem foreign and impossible for some Francophones.

On July 17, 2017, user René Alix made the post “What pronouns do non-binary French people typically use?” In the post, he makes several deductions of his own:

In my limited experience, many don't even bother to do anything special, they use whatever seems to fit better...There are occasional attempts to come up with gender-neutral pronouns (I've seen *iel*, *ille*, *eil*, *ol*), but I don't think they will ever take, because grammatical gender in French is so pervasive, and adjectives and determiners have to align properly, or you sound uneducated. So you don't just have to come up with gender-neutral pronouns, but also with gender-neutral adjective endings, etc. It is very difficult to translate consciously gender-neutral language into French, and generally people default to the masculine class, which is how the French do it, and which carries somewhat less baggage in French than it does in English. Being non-binary in France has got to be a royal pain.

The question is seeded with doubt, illustrating Alix has potentially already made up his mind that nonbinary pronouns are incompatible with the French language. Many commenters share this sentiment, like Thomas de La Marnierre, who says:

The French language has a fundamental grammatical gender binary masculine/feminine. We have no neutral gender. It's impossible to agree words in a neutral way, you have to choose. Even the non-sexuated word "personne" has a gender, which is feminine. In order to do agree words in a neutral way, you would have to revolution everything from scratch, and basically you would create an entirely different language in the process.

Another thing. We Francophones culturally give ourselves great pressure to speak quality French, much more than other languages. If you start messing with the most elementary grammar, you might look uneducated. People will assume you don't speak like the norm because you don't know the norm. You would always have to explain yourself why you are not following the standard model...Therefore, our language is really not a good fit for the small number of people that are not comfortable with the fundamental male/female binary.

This comment truly drives home the idea of differentiation in order to create identity. The phrases "we Francophones...much more than other languages," implies that French speakers have a shared identity based on "quality," and that the grammar structure is impermeable to those who do not attain this quality: i.e. nonbinary people. Even a nonbinary French speaker, Will Bece, commented:

As a non-binary person, I have to admit that it's way too complicated to speak about yourself in french without using any masculine or feminine word. I didn't even try to ask anyone in my environment to not do it. So when speaking orally, I mostly talk about myself with the gender opposite

to the one people associated me since my birth, and asked people to do the same.

Becele's solution is to use the gender accord opposite to their assigned gender, another potential workaround for French. However, like many other solutions, it still functions within the binary. While identifying with "opposite" pronouns is feasible for trans nonbinary speakers, it leaves people who identify as agender or genderfluid in a bit of a stalemate. Finally, user Francis McCarthy brings up the grammatical issues that can arise:

Let's say you create a new pronoun, and you find a group of nice people that are willing to refer to you by this pronoun. In French, the inevitable question becomes: how does the rest of the sentence "agree" with this new pronoun? Should I treat it like a grammatical masculine, or a feminine? "Hi, my name is XXX and my pronouns are X/Y/Z" has now become "Hi, my name is XXX, my pronouns are X/Y/Z, and they follow the grammatical rules for masculine/feminine". Compared to English, you have already doubled the amount of extra information people need to know about you, and multiplied the intellectual effort requested from them by a whole order of magnitude because it impacts multiple elements of the sentence and not a word or two. And since these new pronouns are supposed to mark non-binary gender identities, isn't it unsatisfying that they should follow the masculine/feminine rules? Well, the only way around this is to create a new grammatical gender category, which means detailing a whole set of new grammatical rules, and decide on new priority

rules when multiple pronouns are used. Once you've reached that point, people will wonder what that foreign language that you are speaking is...

Not only does this response differentiate itself from other languages like La Marnierre's response, but it aligns with the same qualms The *Academie* has with inclusive writing: the idea that introducing new aspects to the language will fundamentally change it. This is based on Lyotard's idea that "if there are no rules there is no game and even an infinitesimal modification of one rule alters the nature of the game," (Bershtling 2014:36). While this is not the case for English for the most part, the strict rules of French make it harder to infiltrate. However, there will always be workarounds, as there have been in other languages like Hebrew and Japanese.

Despite the predominant ideas on these forums that nonbinary pronouns do not mesh well with French, there are clear solutions proposed by other groups. For example, the French website Trans Inter Action is an association for the defense of and education about trans and intersex people (<https://trans-inter-action.fr/>). On their website, they provide infographics about inoffensive language, identities, and other resources. On the section of the website labeled "for all," they include a chart about pronoun use, featuring inclusive writing and the pronoun *iel* (Figure 5).



Genre	Sujet	Tonique	Démonstratif	Exemple
Féminin	Elle	Elle	Celle	Elle est venue. C'est bien elle. Celle qui arrive.
Masculin	Il	Lui	Celui	Il est venu. C'est bien lui. Celui qui arrive.
Neutre singulier	Iel/Ielle/Ille	Ellui	Cellui/Cille	Iel est venu-e. C'est bien ellui. Cellui qui arrive.
Neutre pluriel	Iels/Ielles/Illes	Elleux/Ielleux	Celleux/Cielleux	Ielles sont venu-e-s. Ce sont bien elleux. Celleux qui arrivent.

Figure 5

IV Conclusion

None of this is to say that the introduction of a third-person gender neutral pronoun into any language will miraculously solve the social issues and oppression that the LGBTQ community faces. In fact, as noted by transgender activist Pauline Park (2014), languages that feature a gender neutral pronoun (i.e. Chinese, German, Romanian) are often associated with strict patrilineal societies. As Park points out, Mandarin uses one pronoun, *ta*, for she/he/him/her, but China is historically one of “the most patriarchal societies on earth,” (Park).

Overall, French seems impermeable to changes as drastic as epicene pronouns, both from the structural and social perspective. Regardless, language is intrinsic to identity of self and people employ the language they speak in order to accurately convey their gender. In the same way English, Hebrew and Japanese speakers do, nonbinary Francophones are using tactics to reshape a language defined by its binaries.

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