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Cover Page Footnote

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BUCKING THE LINGUISTIC BINARY: GENDER NEUTRAL LANGUAGE IN ENGLISH, SWEDISH, FRENCH, AND GERMAN

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Advocacy for gender neutral language has become a popular and contested topic within queer and linguistic communities. The need for neutral language has been identified not only by feminists seeking to deemphasize gender and promote inclusivity, but by many members of transgender communities who seek a language that will aid them in expressing identities that fall outside of the binary genders of male and female. The growing number of transgender people who choose to use pronouns other than those traditionally linked to maleness (*he*) and femaleness (*she*) has made it clear that movement away from explicitly gendered language provides more space for non-binary transgender and queer people to express their identities. Representation in language can be very important to one's ability to have their identity understood by others and recognized in everyday speech interactions. Though the significance of neutral language has been established, the discussion around its implementation remains fairly anglocentric, raising the question of how neutral language is used and signifies in languages other than English, particularly within languages with varying grammatical gender systems. I posit that grammatical gender systems have a substantial effect on the use and success of gender neutral language. In this paper, I examine past scholarship as well as present the results of a preliminary research study to demonstrate that there is a difference in the use and development of gender neutral language in grammatically gendered languages (French and German) and "natural" gender languages (English and Swedish). I argue that gendered languages have less linguistic "room" for neutral language – by which I mean less space, opportunity, ease and susceptibility to its development – than "natural" gender languages do, based on the amount of grammatically gendered conventions in the language. I also argue that this difference impacts the lived experiences of transgender individuals who speak these languages, and that it should thus become a framework through which we view issues of transgender representation and activism. I begin by exploring the specifics of the grammatical gender systems in English, French, German, and Swedish before turning to examples of transgender narratives that highlight the importance of gender neutral language in identity formation and daily life. I then consider the role of culture and media in bringing gender neutral language into our social reality. I also conduct an analysis of academic literature that provides background on the history of gender neutral language and recent studies in the use of neutral language. I then present the results of my study, which will shed light on current forms of linguistic subversion being employed by transgender people – in particular pronouns, forms of address, and terminology – in each of the four languages, as well as judgements on whether the gender neutral language in each language is adequate for identity expression and whether it is trans/queer specific or widely used. This data, as well as testimony from survey respondents, solidifies my claims of the differences inherent in these grammatical systems and their effect on lived transgender experience. I conclude by making connections based on the study results, outlining areas for further consideration, and discussing how linguistic activism should be context-specific in order to achieve functional and widespread gender neutrality in language. Altogether, this research represents an attempt to illuminate a current issue in the realm of transgender visibility and activism and to put forth new ideas about how language shapes our ability to embody different gender identities in society.

1. Grammatical Gender

Grammatical gender is a noun class system by which nouns are divided into two or more categories, two of which usually correspond with “male” and “female” human genders, respectively. Nouns that do not reflect semantic, or “human”, gender (e.g. *tree*, *car*) are sorted into the categories without any correlation with sex distinction. Semantic or embodied gender, however, is almost always aligned with “masculine” and “feminine” grammatical categories. English and Swedish, two of the languages I will be examining in this study, are classified as “natural gender” languages, as in most cases “the referential gender will agree with the ‘natural’ gender of the referent” (Hekanaho 2015:14). For example, the grammatically feminine category will be used for living subjects perceived culturally to be female. In “natural gender” languages, semantic gender is visible only through pronouns and gendered nouns such as *mother*, *brother*, or *stewardess*¹ (e.g. Hekanaho 2015:12). Grammatically gendered languages, such as French and German, have both semantic and formal (grammatical) gender, which is reflected not only in nouns, but in the adjectives, adverbs, and articles that accompany them. Practically, this means that semantic gender is reflected in more parts of the language than it is in “natural gender” languages, as different parts of speech used in conjunction with a semantically gendered noun must also reflect a masculine, feminine, or potentially neuter gender. The differences between the two systems (and the particularities of each of the four languages) are illustrated in Figure 1 below:

	“Natural” Gender Languages		Grammatically Gendered Languages	
	English	Swedish	French	German
1	I am a doctor	Jag är en läkare	Je suis médecin (m. generic)	Ich bin ein Artz (m.) / eine Ärztin (f.)
2	She is my friend	Hon är min vän	Elle est mon amie (f.)	Sie ist meine Freundin (f.)
3	He is my friend	Han är min vän	Il est mon ami (m.)	Er ist mein Freund (m.)
4	They (s.) are my partner	Hen (s.) är min partner	<i>Neutrality untranslatable</i> (Elle/Il est mon partenaire (m. generic))	<i>Neutrality untranslatable</i> (Sie ist meine Partnerin (f.) /Er ist mein Partner (m.))
5	I am happy	Jag är glad	Je suis heureux (m.) /heureuse (f.)	Ich bin fröhlich

As you can see, in English and Swedish, nouns are not gendered, and therefore words like *doctor*, *friend*, and *partner* do not give information about the gender of the speaker or the referent. English, Swedish and German also do not require gender agreement for the adjective *happy* in the first person. French displays a difference between the masculine and feminine versions of *friend* (*ami(e)*), and uses masculine generics for the terms *doctor* (*médecin*) and *partner* (*partenaire*). French also notably requires speakers to gender themselves in the first person by using either a masculine or feminine version of most adjectives (as shown in sentence 5). German further requires gendered versions of all titles and semantic nouns, and also shows the gender of the noun through the article preceding it (e.g., *mein*, *meine*, *der*, *die*, *das*). Though German does not require gender agreement for unpreceded adjectives (as shown in sentence 5), both German and French require gender agreement for all adjectives that precede nouns, including humans (e.g. if one were to say “*ein wunderbarer Mann*” (a wonderful man) versus “*eine wunderbare Frau*” (a wonderful woman)). There are also languages which are considered genderless due to their lack

¹ Gendered nouns in English and Swedish have diminished in use due to the advocacy of second wave feminist language reformers, as discussed later in the paper.

of grammatical gender distinction amongst nouns (e.g. Chinese). However, this paper deals exclusively with “natural” gender and grammatically gendered languages.

As is evident from the examples above, some languages contain more reference to gender than others. English, though it contains less gender than French and German, has still come under fire from some feminists for requiring sex marking when speaking of a singular third-person referent (e.g. Saul 2004) when sex and gender are irrelevant to the speaker’s message. Despite this, English and Swedish surpass French and German in their ability to incorporate gender neutral language. Many linguistic scholars have observed this difference, among them Prewitt-Freilino et al., who note that:

Despite the fact that gender neutral conventions can be developed for languages within all three grammatical groups, this does not imply it is equally easy to address gendered grammar conventions across these groups. In fact, Stahlberg and colleagues (2007) note that grammatical gender languages (like German) involve much more effort to create a gender neutral configuration—compared to natural gender languages like English—because such reconfigurations require changing a large number of personal nouns in addition to pronouns (Prewitt- Freilino et al. 2012:271)

Others, such as King (1991) and McConnell-Ginet (2011) note that “truly gender neutral solutions do not exist in French as they do in English” (King 1991:13), making it significantly harder “to speak gender-neutrally of the self [and others] in French” than it is in English (McConnell-Ginet 2011:227), sentiments which can also be applied to German. Differences in grammatical gender systems have a clear impact on the mechanics of how people use gender neutral languages, and an understanding of these mechanics aids in an analysis of how these differences impact the state of neutral language and the lived experiences of transgender speakers of English, Swedish, French, and German.

2. Transgender Perspectives: Language, Identity, and Power

The importance of gender neutral language is illustrated through many first-hand transgender narratives and commentaries that highlight language as one of the most important aspects of identity recognition and acceptance. Being misgendered – having someone prescribe an incorrect gender to you through the use of a pronoun or gendered term – is a prominent issue in most transgender communities. Whether misgendering is an honest mistake or is intended to harm an individual or express an opposing political view, it can cause gender dysphoria and discomfort for many transgender individuals. Linguistic scholars Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet remark that “[t]he ultimate power is being able to dictate categories for the rest of society” (2003:7). In this section, I will explore the perspectives of some transgender people who wish to take this power into their own hands and thereby dictate (or demolish) categories for themselves. This review will reaffirm the need for gender neutral language as a way for transgender people to express their identities and claim their own labels.

Transgender is generally defined as movement away from an initially defined gender position, usually the gender that one is assigned at birth. This movement can encompass movement into another binary sex category (e.g. from female to male) or movement that transcends binary gender categories. Popularly referred to as non-binary genders, genders that do not conform to socially accepted definitions of *man* and *woman* can completely reject established gender categories and norms, can mix characteristics of any number of genders, or can express gender fluidity. Transgender historian Susan Stryker summarizes the concept by suggesting that “[o]ne’s gender identity could perhaps best be described as how one feels about being referred to by a particular pronoun” (2008: 13), a notion that holds true for both binary and non-binary trans-genders² and which demonstrates the weight that pronouns and other language conventions have in constructing and experiencing transgender identity.

² I.e. genders that can be classified as trans.

Before delving into transgender accounts of and attitudes toward language, it is imperative to note that the popularized, anglicized North American concept of transgender identity does not necessarily translate into other languages and cultures. Queer theorist Riki Wilchins notes that “white American culture tends to be one of the few that splits sexual orientation from gender. In fact, in many countries, the word transgender is hardly used” (2004:22). While the transgender narratives I was able to access and analyze for this paper have been formed in an almost exclusively North American/European context, they do not necessarily preclude or define the call for neutral language in other cultures or languages³.

Wilchins also provides insight into the ways that language inherently works against gender difference. Noting that language “favours the Same” to the detriment of that which is “unique, unrepeatable, and private” (2004:35), s/he argues that the sense of reality that is afforded to “named” things subjugates unnamed genders to a realm of philosophical non-existence. Hir perspective on language and gender is driven by hir political outlook and by the recognition that Western cultures have always overvalued language, often allowing it to signify what is “Real” for us (2004:38). This highlights the politically charged ground on which gender and language struggles play out, as trans and genderqueer people must live their genders within a stark system of signification that refuses to recognize them in speech or thought. Wilchins observes that the linguistic “application of symbol and meaning can be painful when it’s applied to people’s bodies” and that “[t]his fascism of meaning is a kind of crime – an assault of meaning that forces people to live as gendered impossibilities” (2004:38). Wilchins’ writing reinforces the importance of language in the navigation of transgender existence, both in being able to express the self and have trans-genders achieve visibility in society (a notion which s/he believes language actively works against).

Leslie Feinberg is another well-known transgender author and activist, and was one of the “chief architects of the new transgender sensibility” (Stryker 2008:123), as ze⁴ was one of the first public transgender figures to “define and occupy a space on the borders and intersections of conventional gender categories” (Stryker 2008:123). Uncomfortable at some points with gendered pronouns and forms of address (Owen 1996), Feinberg defined the need for neutral language by stating that “[f]or many of us, the words woman or man, ma'am or sir, she or he – in and of themselves – do not total up the sum of our identities or of our oppressions” (Feinberg 1998:7). Speaking from hir unique gender position, Feinberg highlighted what ze called a “crisis of language” (Owen 1996) which often results in clumsy dual constructions such as s/he, and which would be solved by abandoning binary language altogether in favour of specific language to suit complex gender identities.

S. Bear Bergman, transgender author and public speaker, holds a similar opinion on the issue of identity and language. This viewpoint was initially expressed in his book *Butch is a Noun*, in which he theorizes “butch” as “a gender all its own, something which cannot always be described within the confines of the bigendered pronoun system we have now” (2006:17). Throughout the book, Bergman uses the pronouns *ze* and *hir* for everyone who has not specified another preferred pronoun, and especially for butch and genderqueer individuals, as he wished to “use the language that has the most possibility inherent in it” (2006:17) when speaking about transgressive gender and avoid making traditionally gendered assumptions. In a later publication, *Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation*, Bergman and co-editor Kate Bornstein comment on the increasing amount of “righteously cranky [...] gender politics” arising from the progression of the transgender movement to a place “where we’re not just quietly grateful for being allowed to live” (2010:21). They identify language as an important aspect of these politics, regarding “the agency to have our

³ An example of this linguistic and cultural divide can be found in Francisco Fernandez’s essay “Transliteration”, in Bergman & Bornstein’s *Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation* (2010), in which they discuss how English ideas of genderqueerness translate into their daily life in Spanish, and how terms that may accurately describe identity may still leave one feeling “culturally colonized”.

⁴ Along with *ze*/*hir*, Feinberg also accepted the pronouns *she*/*her* and *he*/*him* depending on context.

own words and definitions of them, and insist upon them to linguistic passers-by” (2010:184) as a significant gain for transgender communities. By virtue of this agency being a relatively recent development, Bergman and Bornstein also discuss the fact that the movement towards neutral language and neologisms in transgender communities is sometimes viewed negatively by older (usually binary gendered) transgender people “who don't like seeing the binary they invested in get dumped out and turned into a hat by nineteen-year-olds” (2010:15), a perspective which is explored further below.

L. D. Wayne, an academic writing about the proposal of neutral pronouns, suggests that binary language enforces the assumption that transgender people should fit into binary gender categories, and results in a failed match between pronoun and person being treated as “a failure to express proper sex/gender identity instead of being seen as a deficiency of our restrictive pronoun system” (2005:86). They believe that the proposal of neutral pronouns should be accepted so that the lived reality of “intersex, ‘inter-gender,’ ‘non-gender,’ or even ‘post-gender’ conditions” can find signification in language and positions of personhood will be opened up in order to achieve a foothold in the fight for transgender rights (2005:87). However, Wayne differs in their insistence that neutral pronouns should be implemented for society as a whole, not just transgender communities, believing that reserving neutral pronouns for transgender and genderqueer people will further cement the hierarchy that ranges from “the superior ‘he’ to the inferior ‘sie’” (2005:88) and will relegate transgender users of neologistic pronouns to an “other” category. Instead, Wayne suggests that we harness the power of neutral pronouns to effect changes in the “gendered relations of power” (2005:89) that affect everyone.

Also concerned with the implications of “othering” are some transgender people who advocate for the recognition of binary trans-genders or assimilation into society. Pauline Park, a transwoman involved in queer activism, highlights the fact that many transgender people want to claim gendered pronouns, and that the influx of genderqueer sensibilities has produced a culture that centralizes neutral and neo-pronouns without a “close examination of how languages actually work” (2006:44). Claiming that pronouns such as *zie* and *hir* will never achieve widespread use because they have no “integral connection to the language and culture into which [they] are introduced” (2006:45), Park instead advocates for divorcing the existing gendered pronouns from their gendered meanings so that they may be used by all without any implications about sex or gender identity (a proposition which would likely not be supported by the other authors discussed in this section). Another opponent of neutral (specifically neologistic) pronouns is well-known transgender author Julia Serano. Speaking as a binary transwoman, Serano opposes the use of neutral pronouns within the transgender community because they suggest that the femaleness or maleness that many transgender people work to cultivate is fake. Serano problematizes the act of others “third-sexing” transwomen “with labels like MTF, boy-girl, he-she, she-male, ze & hir - anything but simply female”, claiming that fictionalizing gender with advents like neo-pronouns “will only ever serve to marginalize [the community] further” (2010:86-87).

Though these individuals only represent a small and limited section of the discourse surrounding gender neutral language, their perspectives do emphasize the importance of it and the politics surrounding it. Often used to express non-binary identities, to create social change, or as a natural next step for transgender activists, gender neutral language represents an important facet of transgender identity. This foundation of transgender perspectives provides an important insight into the need for and significance of gender neutral language as we begin to examine how gender neutral language signifies differently in different languages.

3. Culture and the Media: Lay Linguists, Language, and Social Reality

Outside of transgender narratives and academic endeavors, examining popular culture⁵ and media can provide insight into the state and reception of gender neutral language in a given culture. This brief overview examines how the question of gender neutral language is being represented in the media, in blogging communities and in publically visible material, by commentators and linguists who have a better grasp on the thoughts of the general populous than many academics do. Taking a closer look at how linguistics signify in the everyday, non-academic world, Jila Ghomeshi's *Grammar Matters: The Social Significance of How We Use Language* argues that grammar is based on tradition rather than inflexible rules, and that many of the prescriptive views that refute gender neutral language are rooted in the belief that "language change is equated with language decline" (2010:91). In reality, she claims, though self-appointed grammarians can pass judgement and stigmatize certain language as incorrect (which has real consequences for those who use said language in social and professional circles), their claims are merely personalized prejudices that are "based on dubious claims to right and wrong" (2010:11). Rather than being decided by an authority, most languages are used according to shared public consensus⁶, and new terms are not officially instated but are introduced into speech communities organically with the potential to become widespread. The power that the people have over the language becomes important as it links the acceptance of stigmatized language (including gender neutral language) to social rather than institutional change, making social attitudes significant not only as markers of progress but as targets for potential transformation. While many prescriptivists argue against gender neutral language as incorrect or ungrammatical, the consensus on whether or not its use is acceptable will come from the people who either choose to use it or not, and the prescriptivist viewpoint will become moot. As one blogger notes on the blog *Motivated Grammar*:

Never forget [...] that language is the people's. Your witless superstition will, by-and-large, be ignored by the speakers of the language, and the alleged impropriety will almost certainly win out in the end. Don't mistake yourself for a brave defender of our language against the barbarians at the gates when, in truth, you're nothing but a millennialist shouting about the end-times of the English language (Doyle 2016)

Turning, then, to the viewpoints that we see being reproduced in public forums, we find mainly positive perspectives in English news media. The American Dialect Society reported that singular *they* was selected as the 2015 "word of the year" by voting members⁷, not only as a generic but for its emerging use "as a conscious choice by a person rejecting the traditional gender binary of he and she" (American Dialect Society 2016). A frequent topic of discussion in mainstream and queer media, gender neutral language was reported in a number of different contexts including its introduction as an option for students at some universities (e.g. Scelfo 2015)⁸, the proposal of the gender neutral title *Mx.* within municipal legislature (e.g. Bahadur 2013), guides on how to use gender neutral language properly and respectfully (e.g. Poon 2015), retrospectives on people who use neutral language (e.g. "A Small v for Victory" 2011), and opinion pieces including proposals of pronouns that the (largely cisgender) reporters think would work better than current options (e.g. Kassimir 2015, who proposed *thay* because it sounds similar to *they* but would not be "grammatically incorrect"). Pieces published in official media outlets are complemented by countless unofficial and colloquial blog pieces, mainly by queer bloggers, that present a multitude of perspectives on and accounts of using gender neutral

⁵ Besides the examples mentioned in this paragraph, gender neutral language is also used in creative literary endeavors (see, for example, Livia 1999).

⁶ Swedish, French, and German have language authorities that dictate official rules and changes (the Swedish Academy, the Académie française and the Rat für deutsche Rechtschreibung). These entities influence the use of gender neutral language through the occasional official decree; however, the influence of social use remains the same.

⁷ Membership to the American Dialect Society is offered to the general public for a small yearly fee, which means that the judgements of the society can be said to be those of the public rather than an elite group.

⁸ Interestingly enough, Scelfo reports that the University of Vermont's faculty initially refused to offer singular *they* as a pronoun option for students as it was seen as grammatically incorrect, and opted instead for the neo-pronouns *ze* and *hir*. The university later added *they* but it remained a less popular choice than *ze*. We see the reverse of this trend in the study data.

language (e.g. Pickel 2014). Overall, the reputation of gender neutral language in English media and digital spaces is a positive one, with much of the discourse centered on comparing different proposed pronouns and exposing the language's use as a positive tool for transgender communities. However, there is a balance of articles arguing against its use and the social causes attached to it (e.g. Liddle 2015, Roshell 2015), though the arguments within are usually highly fallacious and based on personal biases. It is also worth noting that English Facebook has allowed users to select their gender identity and pronoun (including many neutral options) since 2014, permitting the use of neutral language to reach a much wider audience via social media.

Swedish media⁹ also forwards a positive view of gender neutral language, which aligns with the growing social acceptance of the gender neutral pronoun *hen* which was recently introduced into the language. One scholar notes that *hen* has been “adopted quite well especially by newspapers and authors” (Hekanaho 2015:27). Because the word was introduced in the 1960s and resurfaced around the year 2000, it has lost some of the feminist and queer connotations that it once had, making it somewhat more palatable to general society and much less of a spectacle (“Sweden Adds Gender Neutral Pronoun to Dictionary” 2015). Though much of the discussion and debate over the use of *hen* happened years ago, and Sweden took steps to “giv[e] institutional validation to those for whom gender is more complicated than the stiff old male/female dichotomy” (Bahadur 2013), there is still some heated commentary taking place in the media. In a piece for *Slate*, Nathalie Rothschild mentions that the announcement that the National Encyclopedia had added the word *hen* “came amid a heated debate about gender neutrality that has been raging in Swedish newspaper columns and TV studios and on parenting blogs and feminist websites”, which had been sparked in part by the publication of a gender-neutral children's book. Though Sweden is known for taking steps to neutralize, such as demolishing “boys” and “girls” toys and clothing sections in stores, lobbying for the right to give a child a unisex name, and proposing gender-neutral washrooms, the influence of gender neutrality on children seems to be a sticking point for many of its opponents. The banishment of gendered terms from preschool classrooms has sparked debates that instead of freeing children from gendered expectations, this is “subjecting them to a whole set of new rules and new norms as certain forms of play become taboo, language becomes regulated, and children's interactions and attitudes are closely observed by teachers” (Rothschild 2012). Swedish Facebook added the option to use *hen* as a pronoun in 2015, along with adding a series of gender identity options, with the hopes that the use of this feature “shows other users that this is indeed a possibility [and] helps bring the identity or concept of alternate gender identities into the mainstream” (Anwar 2015).

French media has been fairly silent on matters of gender neutral language, which could be because neutral language does not exist in the same capacity as it does in English and Swedish (which is explored later in the paper). The only news story located after a comprehensive search is one about an intersex individual who had won the right to identify as a third gender on government documents, and who used the pronoun “‘ile’, a cross between ‘he’ and ‘she’ in French” to express gender identity (McCormick 2015). The article treated the case as an isolated occurrence, with no discussion about communities using neutral language or the political movement surrounding it. To my knowledge, French Facebook has no gender neutral pronoun options. This resistance may be a product of French linguistic structure, but other sources suggest that resistance to change may include a cultural element. In *Pronoun Envy*, Anna Livia equates the French language with the “quintessence of the French spirit”, and therefore with the attitude that French should not be modernized, and “must not be allowed to change, for change will lead to linguistic impurity and incomprehension, paralleled by social turbulence and depravity” (Livia 2001:7). Genevieve Pastre echoes this sentiment in her contribution to *Queerly Phrased*, saying

⁹ All sources for media in Swedish, German, and French accessed for this paper were written in English, which may present some disconnect in terms of the media culture in these languages and how it has been translated into English.

that “[t]he French language cannot undergo the least modification without provoking an emotional response, and every attempt to intervene in matters of language is taken as an intrusion” (Pastre 1997:370). This suggests that perhaps French is less susceptible to the social renegotiation of language that Ghomeshi outlines, as public consensus will usually fall on the side of tradition for French speakers.

Though German and French have similar grammatical constraints, German media and culture seem much more open to the possibility of gender neutral language, possibly due to the strong historical feminist language movement in Germany. In the news, the movement towards neutrality is usually justified by the prior movement towards feminization (the inclusion of both the masculine and feminine versions of nouns and the creation of feminine versions of job titles where none previously existed). As one source reports, the University of Leipzig has gone as far as to implement “generic feminism” in which the feminine form of a noun is exclusively used for all genders with a footnote explaining that all genders are included, to highlight the historical use of the masculine generic (Todeskino 2013). The inclusion of women in language is seen as a first step towards total neutralization, including doing away with the feminine ending *-in* and creating gender neutral forms which would only be distinguishable by the articles *der*, *die* and *das* (Todeskino 2013). Other news sources contain similar notes of progress and hope, suggesting that “[c]hanging attitudes to gender are increasingly transforming the German language, and some theorists argue that scrapping the gendered articles altogether may be the most logical outcome” (Oltermann 2014), and citing positive changes such as the use of feminized forms and the nominalization of verbs to make gender neutral nouns (e.g., “Lecturers are advised to address their students not as Studenten but Studierende (‘those that study’), thus sidestepping the gender question altogether” (Oltermann 2014)). German speakers also have a substantial presence in online communities and forums (e.g. *Genderfork*), contributing to discussions surrounding strategies of subversion and reporting gender neutral language that they have heard successfully used.

The differing societal attitudes and directions of the discussion about gender neutral language in English, Swedish, French, and German may have an impact on how it is socially received and assimilated into each language, because, as Ghomeshi and many others suggest, the power to use and change language rests with the populace, and it is clear that many of them have strong opinions on the issue that are being expressed through social, digital, and news media.

4. Academic Perspectives

4.1 The History of Gender Neutral Language

Since the feminist language movements of the 1970s, many academics have taken it upon themselves to research and write about the history of gender neutral language or the history of the politicized movement towards it. Dennis Baron, whose book *Grammar and Gender* was one of the first to explore the history of the movement towards neutral language, provides a quintessential overview of the intersections of grammar and gender and includes a history of the English language, as well as an entire chapter on the neologistic pronouns created from the eighteenth century onward. Baron talks about the development of the English language from its origin to its current incarnation (e.g. 1986:198) as well as discussing neutral pronouns in a chapter titled “The Word that Failed”. Here, Baron states that the search for an epicene pronoun is not new, rather that “the lack of such a pronoun in English has been a concern to grammarians and word coiners from some two hundred years” (1986:190). He explains that the first epicene pronouns in English were created not because of any political movement for the inclusion of women (or queer people), but because grammarians desired a pronoun that would be

linguistically efficient and grammatically correct without having to reference gender¹⁰. Providing an extensive list, Baron notes that more than eighty epicene pronouns, “little words such as *ne*, *ter*, *thon*, *heer*, *et*, and *ip*” or blends such as “*hesh*, *himer*, and *hiser*” (1986:190), have been proposed since the eighteenth century. He also takes issue with the patriarchal pseudo-generic use of *he*, citing it as one of the reasons that a widely-used epicene is necessary. Despite his attentiveness to neo-pronouns, Baron suggests that none of them have nor will achieve widespread use. Rather, he champions singular *they* as our best chance at a standard neutral pronoun, as it “is widely used in speech and writing and, despite the stigma of ungrammaticality that has become attached to it since the eighteenth century, the construction shows no signs of dying out” (1986:193).

Ann Bodine published a similar cornerstone article on singular *they* as an epicene pronoun that predates Baron’s work, and traces the history of the pronoun’s common usage through the last few centuries of the English language. Bodine insists that “prior to the beginning of the prescriptive grammar movement in English, singular ‘they’ was both accepted and widespread” (1975:129). Also interested in contemporary movements towards the accepted use of *they*, Bodine highlights personal pronouns as “one of the most socially significant aspects of language” and predicts that they will become “the target of deliberate efforts to bring symbolic representation of interpersonal relations into line with the way those relationships are structured in either the ideal or behavioral patterning of the members of a speech community” (1975:144), four decades before the struggle over neutral pronouns became mainstream¹¹.

Other academics provide us with accounts of the feminist language movement and its impact on the use of neutral language. Part of a politicized movement, feminist language has met with resistance because, as one scholar suggests, “[d]uring periods of political upheaval, language is often seen (erroneously) as a source of natural, timeless laws, and proponents of conservatism will quote these laws as models for a well-ordered society” (Livia 2001:6), and “attempts of intervention are often faced with ridicule [and] claims that change is too difficult or impractical, or that it interferes with our freedom of speech” (Litosseliti 2006:20). The feminist language movement began with second wave feminists’ fight to do away with sexist language, particularly the generic use of *he* (which erases women from discourse) and the feminization of things such as job titles (which creates gender distinction in professional and social fields where it should not exist). Despite the protests of prescriptive grammarians who insist that pseudo-generic *he* is correct and natural, the movement away from patriarchal pronoun use and the creation of neutral terms (such as flight attendant) in place of gendered ones (such as stewardess) has been “the most widespread change in English that is considered to have been spearheaded by forces of ‘political correctness’” (Ghomeshi 2010:40). The effects of this movement can still be felt today, as the shift away from generic *he* has made some grammarians more accepting of singular *they* (Saul 2004) and has paved the way for activists to continue feminist commentary on sexism through the use of neutral pronouns (Wayne 2005:85).

The history of gender neutral language in Swedish has also been strong, as according to Karin Milles, Sweden has a “long tradition of political feminist efforts” and “is one of the world’s most gender-equal countries” (2011:21), partially due to linguistic authorities, such as the Language Council of Sweden, taking up the language reforms proposed by feminists. Most of the recent scholarship has been focused on the introduction of the pronoun *hen*, which was first mentioned in the mid-1960s as a way to avoid the use of *han* (he) as a generic, was suggested again by linguist Hans Karlgrén in 1994 in order to improve the Swedish language (Rothschild 2012) and was eventually re-introduced in the early 2000s by transgender people who “found *hen* both useful and symbolically appropriate, since it conveys that the sex of a person is not always

¹⁰ For instance, the pronoun *thon* (a combination of the words ‘that’ and ‘one’) was created in 1884 by a businessman, Charles Crozat Converse, in order to save time (and therefore money) through communicating efficiently and grammatically correctly in business interactions (Baron 1986:200-201).

¹¹ Bodine (1975) and Schweikart (1998) provide similar historical overviews.

permanent” (Milles 2011:26). This uptake allowed the pronoun to move from a generic one to one that can be used in reference to specific people. The origin of the word *hen* is disputed – some claim that it is a combination of the ‘h’ from both *han* (he) and *hon* (she) and the ‘en’ from *den* (it), and others that it is based on *hän*, a Finnish pronoun that refers to both men and women (Milles 2011:27). Regardless of its origins, *hen* does resemble both the masculine and feminine third person pronouns in Swedish, which both “makes it easily recognizable as a third person pronoun” (a key factor in the success of many neutral pronouns) and “symbolically calls the male–female dichotomy into question” (Milles 2011:31). Milles recognizes that “historical data indicate that the establishment of a new pronoun in a language poses severe difficulties and failed numerous times in the past” (Milles 2011:28), as the institution of neo-pronouns has in English, and that this often makes language authorities wary of the prospect of adding a pronoun. However, so far, *hen* seems to be a rare success story and has the potential to become common outside of queer communities.

In French, the history of feminist language looks slightly different, as French campaigns “have concentrated on the derogation of women and the effort to relieve this by creating feminine equivalents for masculine job titles, rather than on the grammatical gender system as a whole” (Pastre 1997:370). While English feminists attempted a distinct movement away from what they considered needlessly feminized terms (e.g. ancestress), French feminists sought to include feminized terms in discourse to move away from pseudo-generic masculine versions of nouns and to assert women’s presence in professional fields. Noting that the movement away from gender has “received more support from Anglophone than Francophone feminists”, Livia suggests that the drastic difference in tactics when it comes to feminist language reform “is due in large part to the different structures of the two languages” (2001:194), lending support to the hypothesis that the use of neutral language will signify differently in different grammatical systems. The German feminist language movement is similar to that in French.

4.2 Aligning Language and Gender: Studies in Practice¹²

In recent years, a number of studies have been done on the use of gender neutral language in society, and it has increasingly been examined in relation to transgender and queer identities. Of particular interest to this paper, some researchers have conducted studies pertaining to the differences in the use of neutral or non-sexist language in a variety of different languages. This section includes a brief overview of recent research on gender neutral language.

A couple of English studies looked to how students were employing general gender neutral language in speech and writing, e.g. Mitchell (1994) and Strahan (2008), both suggesting that younger generations are inherently more used to using singular *they* as a generic pronoun, which makes them more inclined to accept its use with a singular referent.

Few researchers writing in English took the opportunity to investigate the unique circumstances in Sweden (being the only country thus far to officially introduce a gender neutral pronoun on par with gendered pronouns and have it used widely among Swedish speakers); however, the *Psychology & Psychiatry Journal* published an article last year that reviewed the societal progression of *hen* from 2012 to 2015. Researchers analyzed time as a variable, finding that “time was one of the strongest predictors for attitudes” towards gender neutral language, as well as the actual use of the language (“Investigators from Lund University Report New Data on Psychology”).

Of particular relevance to this paper are studies which seek to compare gender in different languages. The 2012 study by Prewitt-Freilino et al. investigates whether gender in the world’s languages is directly related to gender inequality (e.g. economic opportunities and women’s

¹² For theorists that deal with feminist linguistics and the construction of social reality through language, see Litosseliti (2006) and Livia (2001).

empowerment) and sexism in the countries that speak them. Comparing languages with “natural” gender (e.g. English and Swedish), gendered languages (e.g. French and German) and genderless languages (e.g. Chinese), the authors find that in general, natural gender languages have the lowest levels of sexism, and are more susceptible to successful gender natural change; gendered languages exhibit the highest levels of sexism and most resistance to change, and genderless languages fall between the two. Prewitt-Freilino et al. suggest that one of the reasons countries that speak “natural” gender languages have less sexism is because of “the ease of creating gender symmetric revisions to instances of sexist language” (2012:268) allowed in these languages. The researchers forward the thesis that:

If, in fact, language plays a role in how people organize their beliefs about gender, then it stands to reason that differences in the gendered language systems across different cultures could play a role in societal differences in beliefs, attitudes, and behavioral practices about the role and status of men and women (Prewitt-Freilino et al. 269)

Prewitt-Freilino et al. justify this thesis, which is extremely important to this study as I attempt to make the argument that language plays a similar role in the way that people organize their beliefs about *genderqueerness*, and that this difference effects the lived experience of transgender individuals. This research also contextualizes further research into the relationship between grammatical gender and gender inequality.

Another 2012 study by Sarrasin et al. investigates the relationship between sexism and attitudes towards gender neutral language in England, French-speaking Switzerland and German-speaking Switzerland. Results point to the fact that most harmful forms of sexism are more closely related to negative attitudes towards gender neutral language, and that these conditions are much more prominent in German- and French-speaking Switzerland, where gender neutral language has either just been introduced or is still under debate, than in England, where English-speaking society has been conscious of gender neutral language since the 1970s. They also confirm the claim that “[o]verall, the implementation of gender-neutral language can be considered less intricate in English (gender-unmarked language) than in French and German (gender-marked languages)” (2012:115). They conclude that it is the differing linguistic systems, the time of implementation, and the status of implementation that have the biggest impacts on the use and acceptance of gender neutral language (2012:116).

Finally, Laura Hekanaho’s thesis, entitled “Man as His Own Worst Enemy: Lexical and Pronominal Masculine Generics – An Online Survey on Language Use and Attitudes”, focuses on the use of masculine generics and gender neutral language, and whether or not there is a difference in their use in “natural” gender languages (English and Swedish) and gender neutral languages (Finnish). Hekanaho centralizes the experiences of genderqueer communities and their interest in a new, widely-accepted gender-neutral pronoun. Hekanaho’s work is built on the foundation of linguistic relativity, and the assumption that “[n]ot having the right terms affects not only our lingual system, but also the common perception of gender” (2015:9). This somewhat contentious view is confirmed by the respondents of their survey, 87% of whom viewed gender neutral language as important and all of whom “thought language can indeed affect our perception of reality, which might be due to these participants possibly having personally experienced difficulties related to not having an accepted personal pronoun to refer to themselves” (2015:95). Hekanaho also discusses gender neutral alternatives to masculine generics, finding that some English respondents found *they* a sufficient neutral alternative (2015:95) while others indicated the need for a new neutral pronoun in English. Hekanaho also notes that the Swedish addition of *hen* suggests that the addition of a new English pronoun is possible, but that English is a relatively large language spoken in many places, which would make any sort of widespread change very difficult (2015:96).

These academic ventures provide an invaluable foundation for this study, which seeks to expand on previous research and thought, extending some of the above ideas to the specific issue

of gender neutral language use and its different expressions among transgender communities in English, Swedish, French, and German.

5. Study Description, Methodology, and Results

Drawing on the social factors and academic background described above, our primary study was designed to find out what pronouns, forms of address and terminology are being used by people who identify as transgender, non-binary, or genderqueer (from herein referred to as ‘transgender’) and who speak English, French, Swedish and/or German; their attitudes about the language that they use; whether the language that exists allows them to express their identities adequately; and whether there is a difference in the lived experience of transgender individuals based on whether they are expressing their identity in English, Swedish, French or German. The survey consisted of ten questions, all open-ended except for the selection of the language in which they would be completing the survey (see Appendix A for a complete list of the survey questions). The survey data was collected online through surveymonkey.com’s server, and all responses were anonymous. After being granted the Research Ethics Board¹³’s approval, the research team employed a mediated snowball recruitment strategy, whereby notices about the survey were sent to contacts via email and social media posts with the intention that they be passed on to others in a similar fashion, in order to find potential participants. Participants were required to be over 18 years of age, self-identify as transgender, non-binary, agender, genderqueer or gender non-conforming, and be fluent in English or a fluent English/French, English/Swedish, or English/German bilingual¹⁴. The survey was live online from December 23, 2015 to January 31, 2016 and received 182 respondents. Respondents were offered the option of contacting the researchers to participate in an optional Skype interview to elaborate on their experiences¹⁵. To analyze the data, all incomplete¹⁶ surveys were excluded. Answers which could be categorized (pronouns used, for example) were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively, and produced descriptive statistics¹⁷ to reinforce claims made based on the data¹⁸. Questions which required more thought and personal input from respondents were analyzed textually and are spoken about qualitatively in the results sections pertaining to adequacy of identity expression and experiences using language as a transgender person. The intent of the study was to gather information about an area of gender neutral language that, up to this point, had been explored in few academic forums, and to form an interpretation based on the data of the state of gender neutral language in English, Swedish, French, and German, and about the differences in the experiences of transgender individuals in these languages.

5.1 Languages Spoken by Respondents

Due to the unfortunately small population of transgender people who are also bilingual, the number of responses that reference English only vastly outnumber those which talk about French, German, or Swedish. Overall, 83% of the survey responses regarded English only, 7% regarded Swedish, 6% regarded French and 4% regarded German. Therefore, English results lent themselves to analysis that produced descriptive statistics and from which broader inferences can be drawn, whereas the results for English/Swedish, English/French, and English/German

¹³ At Western University; contact ethics@uwo.ca if you have any questions about procedure or participant rights.

¹⁴ Survey results were only able to be analyzed in English due to researcher limitations.

¹⁵ Opinions and experiences expressed in the Skype interviews are included in the discussion of the results below.

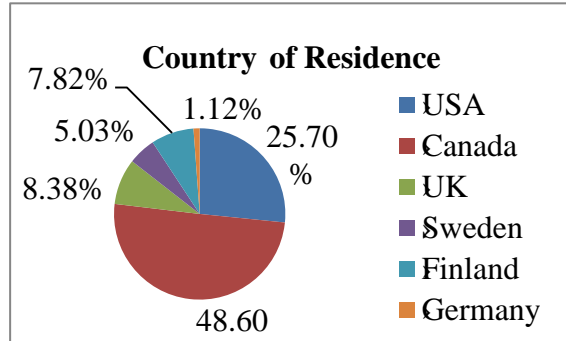
¹⁶ For the purposes of data analysis, an “incomplete” survey was classified as one in which the respondent only provided demographical information (i.e. answered less than three questions) and did not answer any of the open-ended questions pertaining to the use of neutral language.

¹⁷ All data was categorized and analyzed by hand; no algorithms were used. Microsoft Excel was used to verify calculations and organize results.

¹⁸ See individual results paragraphs for more details on how each category was analyzed.

bilinguals were more valuable qualitatively and cannot be said to represent a statistically significant generalization.

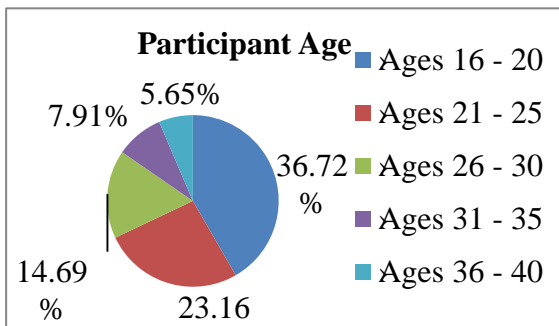
5.2 Country of Residence



Beginning with the first survey question, country of origin, we can see that almost half of the respondents reside in Canada, and a further quarter reside in the United States. This reveals a strong North American bias in the research, with most of the bilingual French and German respondents also residing somewhere in North America. The next highest regions were the UK and Sweden, each making up approximately 8% of the respondents. There were also some participants residing in Finland and in Germany. Though location was not

analyzed as a factor, as it was outside of my scope to do in-depth research on the particular political factors that affect each region's feminist and transgender movements, it is important to be aware of this bias as we cannot necessarily make definitive claims about Swedish-, German- or French-speaking countries, but only about (English bilingual) speakers of these languages.

5.3 Age



In terms of age, almost three quarters of all respondents fell between the ages of 16 and 30; the biggest subgroup within that was 16 to 20 year olds at 36%. This is relevant because it shows a generational gap, perhaps only in the people that the survey reached due to social media and professional connections, but potentially in the people that choose to use gender neutral language or identify outside of the gender binary. Responses decrease as the age factor increases. This may be a positive thing, as it

means the portion of the population who will use and advocate for gender neutral language is both growing as we progress temporally, and is currently approaching an age bracket where these individuals may be able to exert more influence over language in professional and social spaces. Though the lack of age variance of the participants may denote a difference in perspective and gender orientation, it provides hope that the gender neutral language movement will not remain a youth- or student-driven movement in the public eye forever.

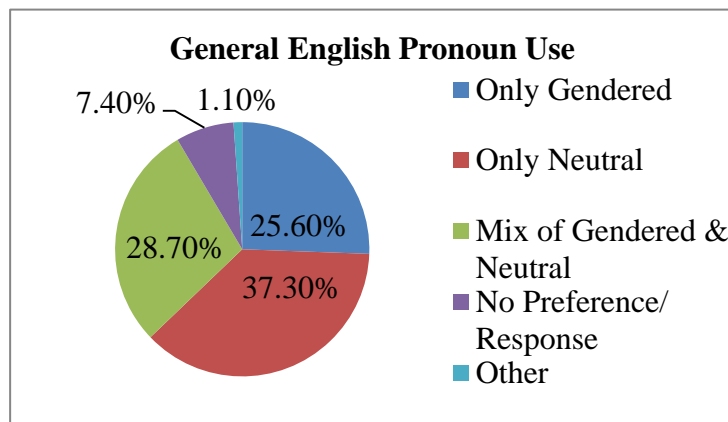
5.4 Gender Identifier

Though not specifically relevant to the aims of the study, it is interesting to note which gender identifiers participants listed to describe themselves. Interestingly, this was one of the most variable sections of the survey, and many participants listed more than one label to define their identities, as the question was left open-ended. Among English respondents, there were some trends: the most popular label was non-binary at 20%, followed by agender at 10%. Gender fluid and genderqueer were also popular responses, at 6% and 5% respectively.

Other standalone labels included transgender, polygender, male, female, questioning, none, two-spirited, bigender, transgender male/female, demi-agender, and non-binary transmasculine.

However, the largest group of English respondents, at 35%, listed multiple identity labels (for example, non-binary / genderfluid or non-binary / genderfluid / borderfluid / aporagender / androgyne / demigirl). The frequency of multiple labelling could point to a larger issue of the current language we use to talk about gender identity not being comprehensive or specific enough to express certain identities (which, unfortunately, is out of the scope of this paper but provides an interesting topic for further linguistic research). Bilingual respondents demonstrated the same degree of variance, with over half of them listing more than one label, and no one label making up any significant portion of the responses. Each English/French bilingual listed a different label/combination of labels, though the labels listed demonstrated much similarity to the English monolingual responses. The same can be said for the English/German results, which were non-binary/genderqueer and agender. English/Swedish respondents did not mix labels, but did use similar labels as English monolinguals, with non-binary, male, genderfluid, and genderqueer being listed once each, and “none” being listed twice. Though in this case, identity labels serve only to contextualize the results pertaining to language use, further research could be conducted into the relationship between gender identifier and pronoun use, the reason for mixing labels, and whether gender identifiers vary over languages spoken.

5.5 Pronouns



The data on pronouns was interesting to analyze due to pronouns’ status as a morphosyntactic unit, and therefore one of the most often used and noticed elements of speech. Beginning with the English responses, we find that most of the study participants are using gender neutral pronouns. Responses were divided into those who only used gendered pronouns (*he* or *she*), those using only gender neutral pronouns (which included *they*, *xe*, *e* (Spivak), *fae*, *it*, and none/name only), those who mixed gendered and neutral pronouns

(e.g., listing both *she/they*, *he/they*, *she/he/they*, or *she/xa*), and those who had no preference/response or listed a “pronoun” that did not fit into any of the other categories (e.g. *sir*). Those using only gender neutral pronouns made up the largest group at approximately 37%, followed by those using a mix of pronouns at 29%. Taken together, this means that approximately 66% of all English survey respondents were using some form of gender neutral pronoun. Those using only gendered pronouns made up 26% of respondents, and those who listed no preference or ‘all’ made up just over 7%. Taking a closer look at the statistics within the English groups, we note that those using singular *they* made up the single largest group of pronoun users at 34% of all English respondents. Interestingly, those using only *she* (13%) and only *he* (9%) outranked every neologistic pronoun, most of which ranked at 1% or 2% each. The second largest groups, both making up 11% of responses, were mixtures of *she/they* and of *he/they*. Mixtures of *she*, *he*, and *they* made up a further 5%, making mixtures of *they* and a gendered pronoun the second largest data group, outranked only by *they* on its own. This data is interesting because it shows that neo-pronouns are not being used in high concentrations, despite the proliferation of them on the internet, their use in writing, and the attention they receive in the media. The overrepresentation in media, writing, and online interactions could be because these realms inspire less direct conflict or tension (if someone misunderstands the neo-pronoun) than their use would in speech, because the situations include a degree of distance. It may be more

difficult to put these pronouns into practice in real life, outside of the queer community, because one would have to explain the pronoun and why it was chosen every time they encountered someone who didn't have a basic understanding of the language or why it was being used. The popularity of *they*, both on its own and in mixed groups, shows that it has already become something of a "standard" or default neutral pronoun in English speaking transgender communities, and is perhaps more easily understood outside of them because it is already a part of the language. It also suggests, as some authors in the above literature review claim, that singular *they* is the only neutral pronoun in English that is and is likely to continue achieving widespread use. The large number of people who listed more than one pronoun is also telling. Though none of them specified how or why they mix (e.g. alternating between the two within sentences, using them separately in different isolated social groups, to encompass a fluid or transitory identity, etc.) it was clear that mixing pronouns was the most suitable option for more than a quarter of people, and may indeed represent a conscious strategy of resistance rather than a lack of decisiveness.

The data for pronoun usage among bilinguals, because it is significantly less than that regarding English monolinguals, doesn't lend itself to statistical or pattern analysis, but can be compared to what pronouns bilingual respondents selected in English to see whether neutral pronoun users in English are finding adequate neutral alternatives in Swedish, French, and German. Two out of the six Swedish respondents used *hen* (but did not specify an English pronoun), two did not list a Swedish pronoun but used neutral or mixed pronouns in English, and two used the gendered *han* or *hon*, with the corresponding gendered pronoun in English. Though the results do not demonstrate correlation between the accepted Swedish neutral pronoun *hen* and English neutral pronouns¹⁹, they do demonstrate that *hen* is being used successfully, likely in the same manner as English *they*. The lack of other Swedish gender neutral pronouns listed may suggest that *hen* is, as the literature suggests, quickly becoming the standard of gender neutrality in Swedish.

Turning to French and German results, it becomes clear there is a significant division between these grammatically gendered languages and "natural" gender English. Two out of six English/French bilinguals used neutral or mixed pronouns in English but used either a gendered pronoun or no pronoun in French, suggesting that there are fewer acceptable options in French for those who may want to take advantage of them. Two out of six respondents subverted the French pronoun system, one using *iel* and one avoiding a choice by using *mon*. Both of these individuals use singular *they* in English. The final two French/English participants used gendered pronouns in French that aligned with the ones that they used in English.

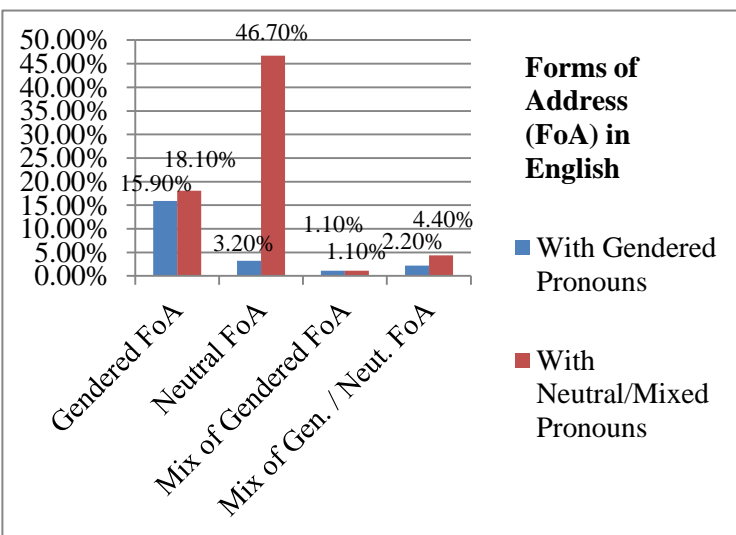
English/German speakers produced similar results, with both respondents using *they* in English and revealing that they did not use a pronoun in German, instead trying to find ways to avoid it in speech. Though some subversion was demonstrated in French, the presence of people who used neutral pronouns in English but could not find or did not feel comfortable using gender neutral alternatives in French and German strongly suggests that the difference between gendered languages and "natural" gender languages is substantial and affects the viability and visibility of different language choices, which is likely contingent upon the ability of neutral pronouns to be used successfully in speech.

5.6 Form of Address

Forms of address encompass the formal titles used to address an individual in social and professional interactions, such as *Ms.*, *Mr.*, *Mx.*, or *Dr.*, among others. The results for the form of

¹⁹ It is not clear whether respondents who used *hen* in Swedish did not list English pronouns because the survey question did not require them to list both or if they use no pronouns in English, and vice versa for those who did not list Swedish pronouns.

address category were analyzed by pronoun group, meaning that choices in form of address were cross-tabulated against whether or not an individual used a neutral, mixed or gendered pronoun to determine whether or not the gender neutral options that have been presented in this area are adequate for those who choose to use neutral language in other areas. Forms of address were again divided into groups: Gendered (consisting of *Ms.*, *Miss*, *Mrs.*, and *Mr.*), Neutral (consisting of *Mx.*²⁰, none, or name only), Mix of Gendered (consisting of any combination of the gendered forms), and Mix of Gendered and Neutral (consisting of any combination of *Mx.* and a gendered form). The largest group of English survey respondents fell within the Neutral category, at a staggering 50% of all responses. Breaking down this category further, we find that the majority of those using neutral options were using the gender neutral neologistic form of address *Mx.* (28% of all English respondents). The use of *Mx.* occurred almost exclusively in conjunction with neutral/mixed pronoun choice (see Figure 6). The “none” (20%) and “name only” (2%) categories, which both qualified as neutral due to the large number of respondents who specified that they chose not to use a form of address because they felt uncomfortable with gendered options, also consisted mainly of those who chose neutral/mixed pronouns. In contrast to the 47% of English respondents who used both neutral pronouns and forms of address, only 3% used a gendered pronoun with a neutral form of address. This contrast highlights the fact that, while there are relatively few neutral options for form of address, transgender people are certainly taking advantage of the neutral options they do have, even if these options are neologistic, as *Mx.* is. The fact that *Mx.* is finding widespread use is surprising, in light of the lack of use that neologistic pronouns garner. Though it could be argued that *Mx.* is as close to resembling current forms of address as a neologism could get, and therefore has the advantage of being generally understood, the inclusion of ‘x’ may contribute to marking it as ‘other’, which could add to the same stigma that currently surrounds neo-pronouns. However, the fact that it is the only known gender neutral option for form of address that allows individuals to retain the formalized aspect of



a title may be one explanation for its popularity: unlike neo-pronouns, there is only one neologistic form of address, creating a sense of cohesion and making the innovation easier for others to grasp. Gendered forms of address were the second largest group amongst English respondents, at approximately 34%. *Mr.* was the largest subgroup at 17%; *Mrs.*, *Ms.*, and *Miss* grouped together represented another 17%. Interestingly, each gendered form of address had more respondents who chose neutral pronouns than respondents who chose gendered pronouns. Though most still chose to use neutral forms of address, the fact a

significant number of neutral pronoun users chose gendered forms of address may suggest that titles may not be as important or as big of a source of discomfort due to their sparse use and their status as a social convention rather than a grammatical requirement. Mixing forms of address, though combinations of both gendered and gendered/neutral forms did occur (e.g., *Mr./Ms.* or *Mr./Mx.*), was not nearly as common here as it was for pronouns, making up only 8% of responses.

²⁰ The full form of *Mx.* is generally agreed upon to be *Mixer*, though some online communities use different variations on spelling and pronunciation.

None of Swedish, French, or German seemed to have an equivalent to the English *Mx.* Five out of the six Swedish respondents used no form of address or name only; four of these did the same in English, while one used *Mx.* in English, demonstrating this lack of equivalency. One Swedish respondent used neutral pronouns in Swedish while using *Mr.* as a form of address, which, again, may highlight a lack of options for neutral Swedish forms of address. The French results for form of address followed the same pattern as those for French pronouns. Two out of seven respondents who used neutral pronouns and *Mx.* in English used no form of address in French, although they used neutral pronouns in French as well, again demonstrating a lack of suitable options for form of address in French. Two more respondents used gendered forms in both English and French, and three used none or name only in both languages. One of the two German respondents used a mix of *Mr.* and *Mx.* in English but no form of address in German, and the other used no form of address in either language. Overall, no neologisms or specific neutral forms that still included the use of a title were listed for any language other than English, demonstrating that English presents more options for neutrality in this area, and that all of the study participants who may have preferred a neutral form in other languages instead chose to forego form of address entirely.

5.7 Terminology

In English, the terminology category presented more opportunity for variation and experimentation, largely due to the fact that English does not assign grammatical gender to nouns. Participants were able to list any and all terminology that they used in reference to themselves, whether the terms were traditionally gendered or gender neutral. During analysis, the terms were divided into the categories of family, relationships, and other (which included general, colloquial, and professional terms). Beginning with an analysis of sibling relationships, we find that the term *sibling* is used by 24% of respondents (22% being neutral/mixed pronoun users), making it the most popular familial term. *Sister* was also one of the most popular familial terms, being used by around 10% of respondents (8% being neutral/mixed pronoun users). *Brother* was not as popular, being used by only 4% of respondents (3% neutral/mixed pronoun users). Turning to parent/child relationships, we see the same trend of preference towards neutral terms. *Child* was the second most popular familiar term at 12% of respondents (entirely neutral/mixed pronoun users), and *kid* was used by 5% of respondents (entirely neutral/mixed pronouns users). *Daughter* was also used by 5% of English respondents (4% neutral/mixed), and *son* was used only by 3% (1% neutral/mixed). There was no statistical consensus on terms for parent, with options such as *mom*, *mama*, *parent*, *guardian*, *parental unit*, *dad*, *daddy*, *dom*, and *domme* all ranking at 1% or 2% each. *Mom*, *mama*, *dad*, and *daddy* were fairly evenly used among neutral/mixed and gendered pronoun users, while *parent*, *guardian*, *parental unit*, and *dom/domme*, which were all used exclusively by neutral/mixed pronoun users. 2% of participants also listed a personalized term for parent, such as *Trumma*, *Zaza*, or a first name, suggesting that unique terms, pet names, and neologisms may be more acceptable in this category and within romantic relationships (as we will see) due to the personal nature of the relationships. There were also a number of respondents who specified that the term their child called them (e.g., *mama*) did not align with their gender identity but was accepted regardless, suggesting that there may be more of a process of negotiation in close relationships such as parent/child to ensure the comfort of both parties. Within married relationships, 4% of all English respondents used the term *spouse* (3% were neutral/mixed pronoun users), while 2% used *wife* and 1% used *husband*. For distant familial relationships, the terms *aunt*, *uncle*, *untie*, *uncle*, *relative*, and personalized forms of aunt/uncle (e.g. *Nacky*) were used (each being listed by 1 to 2% of all respondents). With the exception of *uncle*, which was used by both neutral/mixed and gendered pronoun users, all of these terms were listed exclusively by those who used neutral/mixed pronouns.

In terms of non-married romantic or sexual relationships, *partner* was the only popular option, with 24% of English respondents using it (21% being neutral/mixed pronoun users). The next most common, all at 3%, were *datemate*, *love*, *boyfriend*, and *girlfriend*. Also listed were *sweetheart*, *date*, *lover*, and *my person*, all at 2% (used exclusively by neutral/mixed pronoun users with the exception of *sweetheart*, which was split evenly) and *significant other*, *datey friend*, *babefriend*, and pet names (e.g. *boo* or *squid*) all at 1% and used exclusively by neutral/mixed pronoun users.

Turning to general, colloquial, and professional terminology, we find that the term *person* is listed by 7% of English respondents, and *human* is listed by 3%, both listed exclusively by neutral pronoun users. Similarly, *mate*, *kiddo*, and *dude* were each listed by 1%, and only by those who used neutral/mixed pronouns. *Alumnus* and *chairperson* were both listed by 1%, all neutral/mixed, and *server* was listed by 2%, all neutral/mixed.

Overall, the English results present a wide range of terminology, both neutral and traditionally gendered, and including many neologisms and personalized pet names. The use of gendered terms, even by those who use neutral or mixed pronouns, may suggest that there are in fact many satisfactory ways of achieving neutrality or partial neutrality; though words like *sister* or *dad* do have semantic gender, they do not have grammatical gender and therefore can be paired with any pronoun or part of the English language.

The only terminology for Swedish (listed by a single respondent, who used gendered pronouns in both languages and traditionally gendered terminology in English) was *lärare* (teacher), *pojkvän* (boyfriend), and *son* (son), which are gendered masculine semantically, but not grammatically, as Swedish is a “natural” gender language like English.

The majority of French responses were gendered terms, most of them being masculine pseudo-generics, such as *étudiant* (student) and *employé* (employee), and *ami* (friend), which were both used by those who used neutral/mixed pronouns in English. Some semantically and grammatically gendered terms, such as *copain* (boyfriend), *frère* (brother) and *fils* (son) were used, again by respondents who preferred neutral or mixed pronouns in one or both languages, demonstrating a lack of satisfactory neutral options. However, there were some pseudo-epicene terms like *partenaire* (partner), terms that can agree grammatically with both the masculine and feminine, such as *enfant* (child), and terms that are semantically neutral but grammatically feminine such as *personne* (person). One interesting subversion was the neologism *adelphe*, used by one respondent who used neutral/mixed pronouns in both languages, which does not seem to have any roots in or connection to the French language but is used by French transgender and queer communities in growing numbers to mean *sibling*.

The terminology in German was provided by a single respondent who used neutral pronouns and terms in English, and no pronoun in German. The terms were *Student* (masculine version of student), *Koch* (masculine version of cook), *Angestellter* (a masculine version of a typically unisex word for employee), *Kind* (grammatically neuter term for child or kid), and *Geschwisterkind*, which is a neologism formed by combining the word for *sibling* (*Geschwister*), which is also neuter, and the word for *child* (*Kind*), and which literally translates to “sibling child” in place of the gendered terms for niece and nephew. Though many of these terms represent the use of the masculine generic, the neologism represents a unique attempt at making use of a common facet of German (making compound words), and making sure that the root word is grammatically neutral so that the new word will also be neutral in all of its agreements and articles, thereby creating new gender neutral terminology with elements that are already a part of the German language.

5.8 What’s Being Heard?

The ninth question of the survey asked participants to list any gender neutral pronouns, forms of address, or terminology that they had heard used in their language. Though it does not provide

primary data on what is actually being used in the manner that the previous questions do, this data is interesting as it varies somewhat from what language respondents reported using themselves. In English, the four most common pronouns listed were *they* (reported by 57% of respondents), *ze/zir* or *zie/zir* (21%), *ze/hir* (18%), and *xe/xie* (11%). 3% of English respondents also reported hearing *it*, *fae/faer*, and Spivak pronouns; 2% reported hearing *ne/nir*; 1% reported hearing *ve/vis*, *dey/dem*, *fir*, *ae/aer*, noun-self²¹ and name-based pronouns. The inclusion of a vast number of neo-pronouns in this data shows that while they aren't being widely used by participants, they are being heard, either in use by other people or as demonstrative examples of gender neutral language that may be more idealistic than practical. Only 16% of people reported hearing *Mx.* used as a form of address. 4% of English respondents reported hearing the terms *partner* and *folks/folx* used gender neutrally, while 3% reported hearing *person* and *sibling*, 2% reported hearing *auncle*, *untie*, *child*, *parent*, and *mate*, and 1% reported hearing *pibling*, *sibkid*, and *spouse*. Four Swedish respondents reported hearing the pronoun *hen* and one reported hearing *den*²² used as pronoun. French respondents reported hearing *iel/iel/ciel*, *ille/luille/cille*, *O*, *yel*, *je*, and *on/soi* for pronouns, each only once. The term *adelphe* (sibling), discussed in the Terminology section above, was also reported once. German respondents did not report hearing any pronouns, forms of address, or terms. In all three languages that provided data, it is interesting to note that there were items listed as being heard or known that were not employed by any of the survey respondents themselves, alerting us to a gap between the conceptualization and use of neutral language, especially when it comes to neologisms.

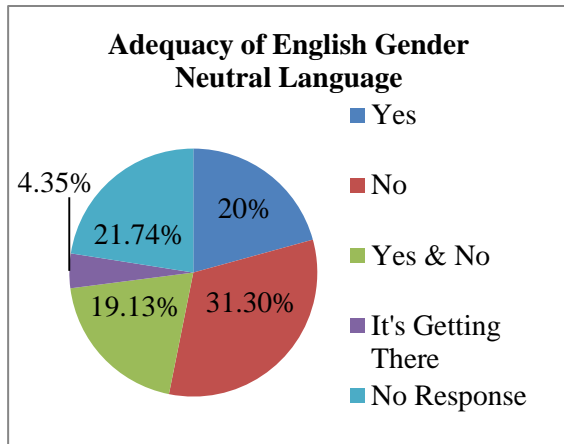
5.9 Is Gender Neutral Language Trans-Specific?

Question nine also asked whether respondents heard gender neutral language being used widely in society, or whether it was used specifically in conjunction with transgender communities. Of the English respondents, 44% said that gender neutral language was trans-specific, with 11% additionally claiming that only singular *they* is common outside of transgender and queer circles. Others claimed that the language was specific to queer and academic circles (4%) or that it was only specific to the internet (6%). While none claimed that neutral language was widely used in society, 3% of respondents were optimistic enough to specify that they were hopeful that this language is making progress towards being accepted in wider circles in which it is currently stigmatized. Of the three Swedish participants who responded to this question, one said that gender neutral language is used widely in Swedish speaking societies, and two said that it is only common in the media. The two French respondents both specified that French gender neutral language was entirely specific to transgender communities, and a single German respondent claimed that German gender neutral language is also trans-specific. The facts that, besides Swedish, each language had some participants specify that neutral language still has not found widespread or accepted use outside of specifically queer contexts, and that already-popularly-acknowledged singular *they* and *hen* were by far the most commonly reported pronouns, point to the fact that much of gender neutral language is still intrinsically linked to queerness and may not be catching on in society as quickly as some may hope.

5.10 Is It Adequate?

²¹ Noun-self pronouns, such as *pla/plant*, are used by people who identify as “otherkin” – a non-human soul in a human body. Using noun-self pronouns is a contentious practice among transgender and even otherkin communities because it conflates gender identity and species identification.

²² *Den* is the equivalent of the English *it*, and is used as a pronoun by a small minority who do not agree with the connection between *hen* and an unknown or third gender, as a way of subverting this system (personal communication with Julia Forsberg (University of Gothenburg), March 4, 2016).



The eighth question on the survey inquired as to whether participants found the gender neutral language present in the languages they spoke adequate for the expression of their gender identity. The responses to this question were especially telling, as it allowed respondents to comment directly on the current state of gender neutral language and whether they felt it was aiding them in expressing their identity in a way that they were comfortable and happy with. The responses from English monolinguals were fairly evenly split, with 20% saying that, yes, English gender neutral language does allow them to express their identity, 31% saying no, it does not allow for adequate

identity expression and 19% saying yes and no²³. 4% specified that they felt that it currently did not allow them to express their identities, but that the situation was improving and that they were hopeful that time and advocacy would lead to increased acceptance of the language that would allow them to express their identities. The only Swedish respondent who answered this question affirmed that Swedish was adequate for the expression of their identity. All French respondents who answered this question (5 in total) reported that French did not allow them to express their identity; the 3 German respondents claimed the same for German. In what may amount to the most significant finding of this study, every bilingual English/French and English/German respondent reported that English *is* adequate for identity expression. This distinction is interesting, as it shows not only that grammatically gendered languages do not measure up to “natural” gender languages when allowing people to express gender identity, but also that bilinguals who speak gendered language have a dual perspective that makes English seem preferable and relatively affirming in comparison to French or German while English monolinguals lack this perspective and therefore have more nuanced and critical perceptions of whether or not the English language is adequate for identity expression. Overall, the stark differences between the responses for English, Swedish, French, and German confirm the hypothesis that there is a noteworthy difference between the experience of expressing trans or queer gender identities in grammatically gendered and “natural” gender languages.

5.11 Participant Quotes²⁴

Quotes from participant responses solidify the importance of gender neutral language and the differences between linguistic systems that are present in the data, as well as raising further concerns and areas for consideration. Many English respondents commented on the difficulty of getting society and non-queer communities to accept and use the gender neutral language that already exists and is created. For instance, one respondent said:

There's little to no language for non-binary people in English, and when we come up with words to make our experiences easier to communicate and our identities easier to express, we're mocked because “that's not a real word” and “those aren't real pronouns”. It's frustrating, and ultimately even getting people to use the gender-neutral language we have in English is difficult and tiring (Respondent 89)

²³ Though this was an open-ended question, the responses from English individuals have been sorted into categories to demonstrate trends. Those in the ‘yes and no’ category were responses that commented on both positive and negative aspects of current English gender neutral language or were undecided. Relevant text from respondents’ answers to this question can be found below in the “Participant Quotes” section of the paper.

²⁴ All participant quotes were taken from the responses to questions eight, nine, and ten. Capitalization and commas have been added to increase readability where necessary.

Similarly, one respondent shared an anecdote about one of the reasons they chose to switch from using singular *they* in English to *he*:

When I was using gender-neutral pronouns in English, it was almost impossible to get anyone who wasn't in the queer community to use 'they' for me consistently. This was at an early stage of me asking them not to use 'she' (the pronoun I was 'assigned' at birth), so I think people were still getting used to the idea of any pronoun other than 'she' for me. But I had the impression that people outside the queer world (not LGBT but 'queer' as in challenging gender binaries) had an even harder time with the idea of a gender-neutral pronoun than with the idea of someone 'crossing' gender lines (i.e. requesting 'he' instead of 'she'). So people would default to 'she', which was unbearable to me. So 'he' felt lots safer to me since it was farther away from 'they' and easier for people to wrap their minds around (Respondent 151)

French responses focused on the difficulty involved in using neutral language in French, ranging from “[a]s a [bilingual], I can attest that gender-neutral language in French is next to impossible” (Respondent 96) to “[i]t's really painful for me to express myself, my gender identity, in French because of the lack of trans history in the use of language” (Respondent 103) to “[s]peaking a gendered language as an agender person fuckin' sucks. I'm constantly misgendered, or I'm misgendering myself in order to be understood” (Respondent 171). The claim that speaking a grammatically gendered language makes speakers view English as manageable and even preferable is confirmed by a respondent who reveals:

In learning French I have noticed how much gender neutrality the English language allows. French is entirely gendered, and it's interesting finding feminist, queer, trans and generally radical views on how to shift French language so that someone doesn't have to shift their identity to participate in this language (Respondent 164)

Another individual speculated about the social impact of French as a gendered language, and how it affects French speakers' ability to conceive of queer and transgender identities (similar, perhaps, to theories of linguistic relativism):

French makes me sad when I think about gender-neutral language. I sometimes/often think that the gendered nature of French makes it harder for Francophones to accept the concept of queerness (in the non-binary sense of the word) or even transness (even in its binary expression, i.e. trans man and trans woman) (Respondent 151)

Many of the same sentiments were echoed in the quotes from German participants. One respondent highlighted the difference between their experiences in English and German:

The options that English presents work reasonably well for me and I can express my gender identity and use preferred pronouns [...]. [In] German I struggle a lot with language and [I am] often very unhappy with the situation of German gender neutral language. I lack usable and easy to learn/apply pronouns and descriptions of myself. That the language is very gendered is a big problem in my life (Respondent 98)

Another discussed these differences along with other linguistic stumbling blocks that come with using a language that genders nouns:

I've studied German and it made me really uncomfortable because gender is even stronger in that language. For example, in English there are multiple nouns that I can use to classify myself (partner, student) without making reference to gender, whereas in German I'm supposed to say the feminine form of many common categories into which I fit, like student (Studentin), and have to explain myself when I refuse. This opens up the can of worms about the masculine form being the automatic unmarked form as well. [...] So in a way, English is not the worst (173)

Some general quotes enlighten us to attitudes towards the movement, the importance of neutral language for some, and the dilemmas it poses for others. For instance, one participant centers on how gender neutral language validates their identity:

Because I'm still treated and referred to as female, and also because I'm autistic, it's quite hard for me to stem away from being female even though I know in my mind that I don't identify as female. Using neutral terms in reference to myself has definitely at least validated my gender identity to myself, which made it a lot easier to hear other people refer to me with feminine terms. It's a lot of effort to change how I refer to myself, but it's helpful (Respondent 175)

Others offer idealistic visions on what a gender-neutral future could look like:

We desperately need neutral to be a default. 'They' is a good start for pronouns, but there's little else that's neutral. Wouldn't it be grand if first addresses were *always* neutral? Then you would tailor to an individual's preferences later. I wish 'she' and 'he' were only reserved for intimate situations, like close relationships. I believe it would do a lot to erase gendered thinking (Respondent 182)

Others are more disinterested or pessimistic about the prospect of introducing neutral language, some due to the trouble that it takes to have it recognized (e.g. "Frankly, I think unless you have very strong feelings about others recognizing your identity, it's pretty exhausting and minimally rewarding to try to get alternate pronouns circulating in a language that has gendered ones" (Respondent 173)), and some due to the fact that the language does not aid in identity expression either way (e.g. "I don't have a 'preferred pronoun', I have a 'pronoun of least resistance'. None of them fit, including neologisms" (Respondent 140)). One respondent raised the point that gender-neutral language and gender-expressive language cannot be conflated, and cannot be said to express the same identities:

The neo-pronouns I use better express [my gender identity], but besides not always being accessible, they're not well known, and I'd have a nearly impossible time getting people in my daily life (not friends who understand) to use them. I usually have to fight just to get the barest amount of gender-neutral language used for me, let alone gender-expressive language (Respondent 89)

Finally, some more socially minded study participants offered overarching comments on the difficulty that trans and queer communities are experiencing in the fight for neutral language: "[t]he linguistic potential and content is there, society poses the actual problem" (Respondent 174) and "once you propose a new mode of reference in support of trans people, suddenly everyone's a linguist" (Respondent 106).

5.12 Study Limitations

There are some limitations in the study design and implementation that prevent the results from having maximum impact. First of all, due to the fact that the strategy for finding participants was a mediated snowball effect that was started by individuals all residing in Canada, a large majority of the participants are from Canada or the nearby U.S., causing a strong national (or perhaps even regional) focus. The fact that most of the surveys were completed by English monolinguals is not ideal. Though all of the results are useful, both in terms of insights into neutral language in each language and of comparing its use, the imbalanced respondent pool represents a limitation in that we are not able to generalize the experiences of bilingual French, German, and Swedish speakers in the way that we can for English monolinguals. Finally, one potential respondent commented on the lack of personal information about the researchers attached to the survey, suggesting that participant safety and comfort could be increased by publicizing information about the identity of the researcher and dispelling concerns about what some could assume is invasive or voyeuristic research about transgender people by a cisgender researcher. Though these steps were not taken at the time of the initial study due to personal comfort level of the researcher, in the future this suggestion could be taken into account and carried out as part of an ethical research practice. Despite limitations in the study design and the results that it garnered, the information that it provides is still very relevant, both in building a base of descriptive statistics and for collecting qualitative experiences of individuals using gender neutral language. As well as being valuable on their own, due to the novelty of the area of study these results provide an important foundation for further research into transgender experiences with gender neutral language and raise fascinating further questions and areas for consideration, which will be discussed in the conclusions.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

By bringing together academic and cultural perspectives on gender neutral language, and by conducting a preliminary research survey of its use by transgender people, I have endeavoured to prove that there is a substantial difference in the way that gender neutral language signifies and is used in grammatically gendered languages and “natural” gender languages. Secondary research and the results of the study both suggest that grammatically gendered languages are not as susceptible to the institution of gender neutral language, having less linguistic “room” for subversion and innovation due to strict grammatical structures and agreement requirements. I have also provided evidence that the differences inherent in these languages have a direct effect on the lived experiences of transgender individuals in terms of identity expression and acceptance.

The importance of the research is justified by a number of first-hand transgender accounts testifying to the importance of language in identity expression, especially for non-binary transgender individuals. The study is also contextualized by the work of a number of gender and language scholars, who have investigated the history of gender neutral language (and thus its future potentialities), theoretical aspects of language and gender, and how neutral and non-sexist language is practiced in different speech communities. The results of the preliminary study discussed in this paper are valuable in constructing an overarching image of gender neutral in English transgender communities, as well as making possible direct comparisons of the use and the experience of using gender neutral language in Swedish, French, and German. Based on the analysis of the results conducted above, a fairly clear picture emerges about the state of gender neutral language in English – many people use options that are already part of the language, and most are aware of neologisms, yet few put them into practice. We can also begin to make a comparison between English and Swedish, which correlate in the fact that they seem to be more conducive to gender neutral language, and French and German, which seem to create linguistic barriers for those who do not feel comfortable with gendered terms.

English gender neutral pronoun use is dominated by singular *they*, and neo-pronouns are used in very small numbers. This supports claims by authors such as Baron and Bodine that *they* is the only gender neutral pronoun that has the potential to become standard and widely used, whereas neo-pronouns tend to fade in and out of collective social consciousness rather quickly. Mixing pronouns also occurs in unexpectedly high numbers, alerting us to a seldom-discussed strategy of pronoun use that begs further investigation. Swedish pronoun use tells a similar story, centered on the official gender neutral pronoun *hen*, which many activists have worked to make a standard in Swedish, and which has been generally welcomed by Swedish society. In comparison, French and German demonstrate few subversive pronoun choices, with only one respondent using a (neologistic) gender neutral pronoun in French, and no participants using neutral pronouns in German.

The same trend is present in forms of address, with the English *Mx.* seemingly ahead of the neutrality curve amongst three other languages that have no neutral equivalents. While English participants were able to make use of neutral terminology that already existed in the language, they also created neologisms to expand neutral vocabulary. In contrast to their lack in pronoun and form of address, French and German did demonstrate more flexibility and subversion in the area of terminology, each offering at least one neutral neologism. This difference could be explained by the fact that it is easier to add lexical items to a language and have them put into practice, while adding a morphosyntactic staple like a pronoun is significantly harder, especially in French and German’s grammatical systems. The judgements on the adequacy of English, Swedish, French and German gender neutral language for identity expression confirms and supports the differences present in the data, as a portion of English and all Swedish respondents found their language adequate, while no French or German respondents could say the same about theirs. While other studies, such as Prewitt-Freilino et al. (2012), can confirm the effects of

grammatical gender systems on gender equality and perception, this research is unique in that it makes a direct connection between the differences in the ability to use gender neutral language and the lived experiences of the individuals who endeavor to. The fact that French and German were both unanimously found inadequate for the expression of non-binary identities highlights an important area of concern for transgender individuals, activists, and feminist linguists. The sometimes-insurmountable barriers that French and German erect for those trying to express non-binary identities dramatically affect many areas of transgender experience, as evidenced by participant testimonies. Besides impacting identity expression and the ability of trans identities to be understood by others, grammatically gendered languages also seem to cause a defaulting to gendered language (often masculine pseudo-generics) at the cost of this expression and understanding, which is known to produce gender dysphoria and discomfort. As demonstrated by the brief glimpse into culture and feminist language movements in each of the languages, there also seems to be less overall acceptance of trans identities in grammatically gendered languages which hinder the progress of queer language. In comparison, Swedish and English speaking regions have a heightened awareness of transgender language and identities due to media attention and an abundance of opportunities for linguistic subversion and activism.

Not only do these differences have profound impacts on individual lived experience of those who wish to use gender neutral language, they also influence the course of queer politics and representation. In light of authors who accentuate the connections between language use and social change (e.g. Wayne 2005, Bergman 2006, Litosseliti 2006, etc.), it is clear that we should not only be aware of the ways in which grammatical gender systems affect the use of neutral language and visibility of non-binary identities, but should tailor our activism to suit the understandings and intricacies of the languages that we work within. In attempting to move away from anglocentric views of genderqueerness, it is extremely important to promote context-specific activism, not only culturally but linguistically. This would include facets such as having an understanding of the differences between how gender interacts with certain grammatical systems, and gaining knowledge on the needs or desires of transgender communities that speak languages other than English, whether they are similar to those of English communities or drastically different. Context-specific activism and further research into the specificities of transgender communities would not only insure against anglocentric imperialist assumptions, but would base linguistic activism on the actual needs and experiences of transgender people who speak the languages in question. Ultimately, better understandings of both the languages and the communities that speak them has the potential to lead to a more universal (if appropriately varied) practice of gender neutral language, constructed specifically to express transgender identities in ways that speakers find adequate and suitable. Throughout this process, our activism should retain the notion that language has unquestionable power over our interactions and the way that we process, accept, and validate identities.

In addition to these conclusions, this research also reveals a number of areas that would benefit from further inquiry. One of these areas is the difference between gender neutral and gender expressive language: some participants in this study pointed out that neutral language felt like a generalization, whereas certain neo-pronouns were more expressive of their gender identity²⁵. Judging on the history and current state of most neologistic pronouns, it may be significantly harder to normalize gender expressive language in society, but it is evidently worth the effort for those who wish to use such pronouns to express a certain nuanced trans identity and should not be dismissed as impossible or as a waste of effort. It would also be worthwhile to conduct a more detailed analysis of the relationship between culture, language, and the expression and acceptance of gender identity. For example, one could analyze this data to expose trends based on country of residence, and discover whether language use varies based on geographical context (this could include examining how queer and feminist movements have developed differently in France and

²⁵ While this claim was made by an English monolingual participant, some say the same about Swedish *hen* (see footnote 20).

Quebec and measuring the impact of this on language use, etc.). The results could be analyzed similarly to include age range as a factor, to determine if certain pronouns, forms of address, or terms occur in higher levels among different age groups. From a theoretical perspective, it is interesting that many of the previous studies that compare gender in different grammatical systems operate under an assumption of linguistic relativity, even if the concept is not named or centralized. The results of this study could be theorized further to determine the role of linguistic relativity in the acceptance of queerness and transgender identities in different languages. Finally, we must also consider the consequences and implications of having gender neutral language move into mainstream use. As it exists now, most neutral language is stigmatized, especially if it can be linked to queerness; this makes it harder for people to be taken seriously when they use it and apply it to themselves. Moving this language into the mainstream may serve to normalize and depoliticize it, as we see in the case of Sweden's *hen*. Regardless of transgender politics that would see neutral language remain "othered", and those that wish to abolish "othering", the destigmatization of gender neutral language would go a long way toward the acceptance of different identities in social and professional circles, which would in turn decrease genderphobia and transphobia.

It is evident from both the primary and secondary research conducted for this paper that there are pronounced differences in the use of gender neutral language in English, Swedish, French, and German. It is my hope that these results be used as a stepping stone for further research into the intricacies of gender neutral language use in transgender communities, as well as an incentive for context-based linguistic activism that will see the introduction and use of gender neutral and gender expressive language that works with particular linguistic systems while affording transgender and genderqueer people the ability to express their identities effectively. Altogether, these will be first steps towards the institution of conscientious and thorough gender neutral language in all languages, to the great benefit of those who need it.

7. Appendix A: Study Questions

Gender and Language Survey

You are being invited to participate in this research study about how gender neutral language is used by transgender people in different languages. The purpose of this study is to investigate what alternatives to gendered language (such as gender neutral pronouns and titles) are being used in English, German, French and Swedish, and whether these gender neutral terms allow people who speak these languages to express their gender identity adequately.

If you agree to participate in this study you will be asked to complete the following questionnaire. This anonymous questionnaire will take around 10-20 minutes to complete, and all of the questions are optional.

By taking this survey, you are indicating that you are at least 18 years old, self-identify as a transgender person, and understand either written English or English and German, French, or Swedish.

1. What country do you live in?
2. How old are you?
3. How would you describe your gender identity? What gender identifier (e.g. agender, genderqueer, non-binary) do you use, if any?

Please complete the rest of the survey questions thinking about the language(s) that you use most often

4. I will be completing the rest of this survey in reference to (if you select more than one, please answer questions 5-10 for all languages selected):
 - a. English
 - b. German
 - c. French

d. Swedish

5. What pronouns do you prefer others to use when referring to you?
6. What form of address do you use for yourself and prefer others to use when referring to you? (e.g. Mr., Mx., Miss, etc.)
7. Think about any roles you perform in your daily life (e.g. student, parent, partner, sibling, sales clerk). What gendered or non-gendered form of these terms do you use?
8. Do you feel that the gender neutral language (pronouns, titles, forms of address) that exists in your language allows you to adequately express your gender identity? Why or why not?
9. Describe any gender neutral pronouns, forms of address, and titles that you have heard used in your language. How common are these in everyday conversation? Are they used widely, or are they specific to the transgender community?
10. Do you have anything to add about your experiences using language as a gender nonconforming individual, or about the differences between your experiences in English and German, French or Swedish?

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