

**GENDERED NEUTRAL:**  
**Identity Development of Francophone Individuals with Non-binary Identities**

A Senior Honors Thesis for the Department of Sociology

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2012, a Radiolab podcast episode called “Colors” came on the air. In this episode, they discuss how color, though a phenomenon that can be found in nature, partially only exists in the mind. The hosts interview Guy Deutscher, a man who has studied and researched how differences between languages shape the way people perceive the world. Deutscher discusses a casual experiment he performed on his daughter. As she grew up, he never told her what color the sky was. When she was a few years old, he asked her to look up at the sky and tell him the color. She was unable to, and said that she only saw it as white. The older she grew and the more language she learned, the more she was able to see the sky as blue. This experiment shows a question that scientists and researchers since Isaac Newton have been trying to uncover: can people see color if they do not have a name for it?

A similar question is suggested on websites such as BuzzFeed which lists “23 Perfect Words For Emotions You Never Realised [*sic*] Anyone Else Felt,” such as “chrysalism” which the article defines as the amniotic tranquility of being indoors during a thunderstorm” (Buzzfeed 2015) and such as The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows ([dictionaryofobscuresorrows.com](http://dictionaryofobscuresorrows.com)). Articles and websites such as these suggest that people are not alone in their feelings and that sometimes the way to better understand one’s own feelings first comes with having the language to describe it. Further, language cannot prevent people from having certain feelings, as these emotions exist even if a person does not have a word to describe them.

These feelings that people experience but cannot name, however, are not limited to emotions such as happiness, sadness, disgust, or horror. People can have feelings about different aspects of their lives and identities without having the vocabulary to describe their experiences. One such example is looking at non-binary people. People who are non-binary have identities

that do not exist on the polar ends of the gender binary; they are neither exclusively man nor woman but rather have a gender that is somewhere between the two. The process of developing a non-binary identity, as with developing a binary gender identity, is complicated, as there are few non-binary people in mainstream media and as little focus is given to non-binary identities in much of LGBTQ+ activism, especially when compared to the common representation of binary people in the media and to how much focus is given to binary trans rights. This identity development process is further complicated as there is no one set of norms to which non-binary people can ascribe. Whereas ideals of masculinity and manliness can turn towards well-established gender norms for men, ideals of being non-binary are non-existent, as the gender inherently allows people to present themselves without the constraints of gender norms. Often, then, people who are non-binary perceive a gap between how they feel regarding their gender and the possibilities for their gender identity and expression until they learn about the possibility of being non-binary. Learning the terminology regarding being non-binary and learning that a community of non-binary people exists becomes important, as their gender can, much like the blueness of the sky, finally be seen and perceived. Because of the importance of language regarding identity development and expression here and because of the lack of visible markers to which people can turn to express their gender-neutral identities, language to show a marker of being non-binary becomes more valuable, such as the usage of less gendered pronouns.

Many non-binary people choose to use pronouns aside from “she/her/hers” and “he/him/his,” but instead using “they/them/theirs,” “ze/hir/hirs,” or “xe/xim/xirs” (LGBT Resource Center at UWM), as these pronouns are more gender neutral, or are not on the gender binary. This attempt to create gender neutrality in English, though sometimes met with complaints that using a singular “they” is improper grammar, is facilitated by the lack of

grammatical gender present in the English language. Other languages such as French have a grammatical gender and therefore do not have the same room in the language for potential gender neutrality as English does.

French as a language is highly gendered as male/female. French third-person singular and third person plural pronouns are gendered on the binary, meaning that there is no French equivalent to a gender neutral “they” as there is in English. Further, adjective spellings are changed depending on gender, and the spelling of past participles of some verbs changes depending on gender as well. Language having grammatical gender is not unique to French, however French and France are unique because of the social standing that is given to the language. France has a governmentally-appointed group called the Académie française, and this group of famous writers determines what is deemed proper in the language and what should be avoided to maintain the purity of the language. The French government and French society actively work to ensure that the French language remains unchanged throughout history because, to them, a language that is changed by outside forces loses its power and independence. People may push back against the rules of the language, but the Académie still has the institutionalized power to deem what the norms are of the language. One pushback that is becoming increasingly more common against the language is regarding the lack of gender-neutral language in French.

In French, using gender-neutral language is not easy, as there are no established gender neutral pronouns and no established gender-neutral adjective forms or past participle endings. Some people choose to create their own pronouns and change the spelling of other parts of speech to reflect their gender, however these tactics have specifically been renounced by the Académie française as being improper and the usage of these practices is not widely known or understood in the Francophone community. These decisions become influential, as having

language is so influential in understanding one's identity. Despite French being so gendered and there being so little language to express gender neutral identities, people still are able to do so, meaning that the grammatical structure of the French language does not prevent people from being able to develop their gender identities.

Then, if language is able to influence the ways in which people are able to form a gender identity, does the French language in-and-of itself not influence gender identity development of Francophone non-binary people? This notion is important to understand, as language is an important facet of identity development, and language is the means through which people express their own experiences. Without language, can one properly express their experiences to others? How much does language influence identity development? If the language that a person is taught, such as the vocabulary which exists in the language, shows what a society values, what does French not having words to describe neutral gender identities suggest about what the French government values? Gender is one of the most important facets of a person's identity and shapes behavior, as people attempt to ascribe to gender norms. What are the implications of having a person's gender not being recognized in a language? Is the French government formally delegitimizing an identity held by many of its citizens and is this refusal to give them space in the language a suggestion that they do not have a right to exist within French society?

## **METHODS**

In my research, I based my analysis on multiple methods of acquiring data. Keeping with the qualitative methods of sociology, I triangulated my data using structured interviews and content analysis. In order to notice relevant phenomena present in my ethnographic observations and interviews, I used open and focused codes based on Esterberg's (2002) methods of coding. I used this qualitative method of gathering data to answer my question because qualitative research is the best way to uncover how a person feels, their thought processes, and the changes that they experience throughout their lives. Qualitative research, in its question formats, allows people to answer questions about emotions and beliefs, two of the most important components of this research. Further, content analysis allows me to understand the context in which much of my research is being conducted.

I conducted two round of structured interviews, using purposeful sampling techniques (names of respondents were changed). All respondents were interviewed using Qualtrics online surveys that were distributed by email or via a post I made on a Facebook page called "NB Francophone : Non-Binaire, Queer, Androgyne, Fluide, Agenre, Xénogendre.." which translates to "Non-binary Francophone: Non-Binary, Queer, Androgynous, Gender fluid, Agender, and Xenogender." This Facebook group defines itself as a support group for people who speak French and/or live in Francophone countries and whose gender identity does not lie on the gender binary. This group is closed on Facebook, meaning that non-members can see that the group exists and the members of the group, however non-members cannot see what users post.

There are 3,317 members of the Facebook group as of April 2018. It is unclear what percentage of the French-speaking non-binary population this represents. A recent survey published by the French news source *20 Minutes* explains that, of the 1,003 people they



interviewed, 13% of respondents between the ages of 18 and 30 have a non-binary gender identity, a number that drops to 6% among respondents when age is not a variable (Gabriel 2018). Despite the survey's claims, this 6% does not seem to be reflective of the overall French population, as this would mean that there are nearly 4 million non-binary people living in France (worldometers 2018). By comparison, it is estimated that only about 0.6% of the United States population has a binary trans gender (Meerwijk and Sevelius 2017). This statistic is also significant, as there are many more people with binary trans identities than there are people with non-binary identities (National Center for Transgender Equality 2016), meaning there is no way that this study from *20 Minutes* could accurately estimate that 6% of the French population has a non-binary gender identity. There are no surveys that exist that look at what actual percentage of the French population has a non-binary (or binary) gender identity.

The Facebook group does not have available statistics about the demographics of members, however I have noticed that most people who interact with the page seem to be white, under the age of 30, and living in mainland Europe (especially within France). Relying solely on this Facebook group for respondents is inherently limiting, as it excludes every person who does not have access to the internet or social media. However, this Facebook group seems to be the largest community of non-binary Francophone people on social media, meaning that it was the source that was most likely to provide enough respondents to get a sample that represents the majority of Francophone people with a non-binary identity.

I messaged the administrators of the Facebook group (whose names and profiles were publicly visible) and was given their permission to post the Qualtrics link to my set of interview questions in the group. I also provided my email address if people had questions regarding the interview process or needed clarification regarding any questions asked. Most questions that

people posed were asked in the comments section of my Facebook post, and either I or other members of the group responded. In order to access the interview questions and to respond, people had to read the consent form and click that they consented.

I found this Facebook group through an American friend who is non-binary and used this group to meet more non-binary people in France when they lived in Paris during the Fall 2016. Though I am not non-binary, I am a member of the group. This is allowed within the rules of the group, as they make explicit that people who are LGBTQ+ and wish to act as allies to non-binary people are welcome in the group. I, a queer woman, made explicit to the administrators of the group before requesting acceptance in the group that, though I am cisgender, I am a member of the LGBTQ+ community. To become a part of the group, I had to answer two questions that are mandatory for all new members. The first is “list all of your privileges,” and the second is “why do you want to be in this group and how would you participate in this group?” To answer the first question, I said “I’m cisgender, first world, upper middle class, white, straight passing, educated, neurotypical, able bodied,” and to answer the second I said “As a queer woman and as an ally to the trans and non binary community, I would love to talk with non binary people. I speak French and study gender and would love to be in a space where I can speak to and learn from others.” I was granted access less than a week after applying.

I chose this population because of the seeming contradiction between a gendered language (French) and gender neutrality (shown by non-binary peoples’ gender). This group of people grew up in a gendered society with a gendered language, however this specific population had to break from the gendered and language norms in a way that other groups do not. Though binary transgender people have to put forth so much effort to express their gender in the French language and society, non-binary people are given a more difficult challenge, as there are no

accepted means by which they can fully express their gender in the French language. They have to both transcend gendered norms within the society and then further create their own spaces within the language. Further, though cisgender people, like non-binary people, are influenced by the language they speak, many do not feel the same discomfort in the language that non-binary people feel, as the language is designed with cis people in mind. Non-binary people, however, are exposed to the constant discomfort of the prevalence of gender within the French language. This population also actively uses social media and online communities to explain their gender and support each other, meaning that they are both aware that they need a community of people who understand and share their struggles fairly easy to contact and with whom to interact.

Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 55 and lived in Francophone countries including France, Belgium, French-speaking Canada, and Switzerland. Respondents live in towns or villages as small as a few thousand residents and as large as Paris. Most respondents said that their gender either was non-binary, agender, or genderqueer, and respondents used a wide range of pronouns from “il” to “elle” to “iel” to “ul,” though many who used binary pronouns said they did so because they either felt more closely linked to that specific gender, did not want to have to explain themselves to strangers, or did not want to change from the pronouns they had used for the entirety of their lives. I did not ask respondents about their racial identities, as this is not a subject discussed in French culture and as there are no good translations of questions about race.

Table 1: Demographics of First Round of Interviews

<b><u>AGE</u></b>	Raw number	Number as percentage of respondents
18- 24	20	69%
25-34	6	21%
35-44	1	3%
45-54	0	0%
55+	2	7%
<b><u>GENDER</u></b>		
Non-binary	14	45%
Multiple genders or Genderfluid	6	19%
Agender	4	13%
Non-defined gender	7	23%
<b><u>CURRENT LOCATION</u></b>		
In France	24	77%
Not in France but in a French-speaking town in Europe	5	16%
In a non-French-speaking town in Europe	1	3.5%
In a French-speaking town outside of Europe	1	3.5%
In a non-French-speaking town outside of Europe	0	0%
<b><u>LOCATION WHERE RAISED</u></b>		
In France	25	80%
Not in France but in a French-speaking town in Europe	4	13%
In a non-French-speaking town in Europe	0	0%
In a French-speaking town outside of Europe	1	3.5%
In a non-French-speaking town outside of Europe	1	3.5%
<b><u>PRONOUNS USED</u></b>		
Binary pronouns (il or elle)	11	37%
Non-binary pronouns (iel or ul)	6	20%
Multiple pronouns	9	30%
No set pronoun series/Using name instead of pronouns	4	13%

Table 2: Demographics of Second Round of Interviews

<b><u>GENDER</u></b>	Raw number	Number as percentage of respondents
Non-binary	7	50%
Multiple genders or Genderfluid	4	29%
Agender	1	7%
Non-defined gender	2	14%
<b><u>CURRENT LOCATION</u></b>		
In France	11	79%
Not in France but in a French-speaking town in Europe	1	7%
In a non-French-speaking town in Europe	2	14%
In a French-speaking town outside of Europe	0	0%
In a non-French-speaking town outside of Europe	0	0%
<b><u>ALSO PARTICIPATED IN THE FIRST ROUND OF INTERVIEWS</u></b>		
Yes	2	17%
No	10	83%

Respondents were not required to answer any interview questions and were not limited by time constraints. They gave consent and agreed that they were legal adults (18 years of age or older) by clicking “yes” on the consent form on the first page of my Qualtrics interview. This was the only question that was mandatory to answer, and not giving consent resulted in not being able to partake in the interview.

The first interview contained 29 questions and was answered by 31 participants.. The interview was conducted in French and, with the exception of some English phrases, the responses were also in French. The questions in this interview largely had to do with the ways in which respondents’ lives were gendered as children and teenagers and the roles of different institutions in shaping these gender norms (“12. Of all the ways your parents made gender norms for you, what were the most salient? Was it the clothes they bought you, the activities, dating

expectations, first names?”). Other questions in the interview asked about how respondents view gender within the French language, changes they would like to see within the language, how they came to understand their gender, and what their gender means to them. After analyzing the data from the first interview, I created a second set of interview questions which I distributed via Facebook and email.

The second interview contained 16 questions and was answered by 14 respondents, three of whom had also participated in the first interview. Much like the first interview, these participants were interviewed and responded in French. In this interview, the questions asked respondents how they felt about having a gender-neutral identity while living in a place where the language is gendered and about the significance in their lives of learning the term “non-binary” for the first time (“14. Growing up in a very binary language seems like it would make it more difficult to understand yourself as non-binary. Is this true? If so, why? If not, why not?”). The respondents were also asked how they would like to see the language change if at all. In addition to these questions, I analyzed different statements made by the Académie Française, the governing body that dictates the rules of the French language. I also ended every interview with a question asking if they had any further comments or would like to say anything that fell outside the scope of my questions in order to give respondents an opportunity to fully express their thoughts.

The Académie Française has published numerous statements regarding potential changes to be made in the French language, and several of them regard gender within the French language. One specifically details problems that the organization has with a push for changes in the language to include gender neutral pronouns, adjective endings, and verb endings. This was

analyzed in order to understand how groups in power respond to the feelings and attempts to change the language which many respondents expressed that they desired.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

I am interested in studying how living in a gendered language influenced the identity development of non-binary people and looking at the limitations of the power of language. To understand this topic, we need to first explore the topic of language and its relationship to identity.

### LANGUAGE

Language is the means by which a person expresses oneself that is understood by a greater community (Merriam Webster Dictionary). This definition of language provides a few key aspects of language. The first is that, in order to express oneself, one has to have the language to do so. Some theorists argue that there “might well be” feelings and thoughts that a person is unable to translate into words, “but it would be much harder to elaborate... The result is that whether or not we have similar thoughts and emotions, the world is split between people we can understand and those we cannot” (Haines 2017:223). This argument poses the idea that people could possibly be able to have thoughts without the words to express these thoughts, however this process would be difficult. This quote also suggests the inherent separation of experience from the expression of experience. One theorist writes that “experience is what we think and feel in any particular situation, and it is expressed in language. Experience is prior to a language but requires language in order to be communicated to other people” (Weedon 1997: 81). This explains that people can have experiences and can feel emotions, even if they do not have the words to express it. However, these experiences cannot be shared and cannot be validated without the proper language from all parties involved. This validation is important because, without having others acknowledge one’s experiences because of a lack of language, one is left



alone without the words to share their experiences, meaning they are isolated in their feelings.

One of the main ways in which people learn the language to express their experiences or to learn about which experiences are meant to be expressed comes via education.

Education is the system through which the ideals of the older group (the group who here has the power) are transferred to the younger group. Jenks (2005) describes education and the role of a person in the education system, writing that,

one is made up of all the mental states that apply only to ourselves and to the events of our personal lives: this is what might be called the individual being. The other is a system of ideas, sentiments and practices which express in us, not our personality, but the group or different groups of which we are part; these are religious beliefs, moral beliefs and practices, national or professional traditions, collective opinions of every kind. Their totality forms the social being. To constitute this being in each of us is the end of education (347).

In other words, a person's identity is comprised of all of their lived experiences and all of the different ideologies of the communities of which they are a part, and the goal of education is to teach people how to use both in order to form their identity.

According to symbolic interactionist theories within sociology, much of identity formation comes from a person's community, or the society in which they live and grow.

Children, when trying to understand their gender,

“develop concepts of themselves as individuals, as an "I" (a proactive subject) simultaneously with self-images of themselves as individuals, as a "me" (a member of society, a subjective object). Children learn that they are both as they see themselves and as others see them... To the degree that children absorb the generalized standards of society into their personal concept of what is correct behavior, they can be said to hold within themselves the attitude of the "generalized other." This "generalized other" functions as a sort of monitoring or measuring device with which individuals may judge their own actions against those of their generalized conceptions of how members of society are expected to act” (Devor 2001:416).

Here, one can see that children develop their gender by seeing how their behavior is matched by those around them and how their performance of gender is received by others with whom they interact. They use the lessons that their performances of gender teach, such as acting in one way because it was received more positively, to inspire how they will behave in the future. After a

certain amount of time with this socialization, children can understand how they are expected to behave and are solidified in what the expectations of their gender are. This means, then, that a person must not only understand themselves as their gender but must also understand the expectations for their gender as a whole. These lessons are often passed down through education in a society.

This is not necessarily education in the sense of formal schooling, but rather the ways in which older groups in society educate younger groups on the values of a society. This means that a person's understanding of themselves is both comprised of their own beliefs and the beliefs of their community and that this understanding comes from education and the influential factors there within.

One of the most influential communities that shapes education and the way a person understands themselves is a speech community, such as the community of people who speak English or the community of people who speak French. Speech communities are defined by sociolinguist Gumperz (1964) as spaces where, "regardless of the linguistic differences among them, the speech varieties employed within a speech community form a system because they are related to a shared set of social norms" (116). This brings to light the important ties between language and culture, specifically that culture heavily influences language. Language is constructed by society and choices on what terms and structures to include within a language and what to leave out reflect norms that a society wishes to promote. These ideals are then passed down from older generations who already know the language to younger ones.

When language is passed down from groups in power to younger groups, what is being passed down more are the both implicit and explicit moral standards that are tied to the language. Ahearn (2012) explains that "learning a first language and becoming a culturally competent

member of a society are two facets of a *single process*. It is virtually impossible for a child to learn a language without also becoming socialized into a particular cultural group, and, conversely, a child cannot become a competent member of such a group without mastering the appropriate linguistic practices” (54). A person must fit the rules of a community in order to be recognized and understood, so tying an understanding of a person’s first language and their cultural group must be done to understand the importance of language, or that “cultural values and social practices” are “inseparable from language and its acquisition” (Ahearn 2012:54).

This new set of understandings from language education can be, for example, in what vocabulary exists (or does not exist) in the language. Language is not the only marker of social norms and culture, however it serves fairly well as an indicator of what a society values as important. Different languages, then, can express different social norms and values within the language.

Some theorists take this idea one step further and argue, then, that specific languages shape the thought pattern of the people speaking the language. Many argue that “the nature of any particular language affects, conditions, constrains, and channels the way people think. It may involve the words people use: some languages have more words for some things than other languages do” (Haines 2017:229). This makes sense in the context of the speech-community. If a particular group of speakers of a language do not have the vocabulary to express certain emotions, then people who experience the emotions are unable to express these to others. If they are unable to express the experiences through language, they cannot introduce potentially new terms to describe their experiences back to the speech-community. This, then, prevents others from being able to express their experiences, as the language has not changed to include more vocabulary. This would explain why having more words for a specific subject or learning a

second language could greatly shape the way a person thinks and can allow people to have understandings of ideas that they might not have been able to access otherwise, as they are able to access multiple speech-communities and the terminology there within.

Weedon, a poststructuralist theorist, furthers this idea and explains that language reflects the types of experiences that a person is allowed to have and have validated by others. She writes that

Experience is not something which language reflects. In so far as it is meaningful, experience is constituted in language. Language offers a range of ways of interpreting our lives which imply different versions of experience. In the process of interacting with the world, we give meaning to things by learning the linguistic processes of thought and speech, drawing on the ways of understand the world to which we have access (1997: 81-82).

Language does this by allowing people to express their experiences in a way that allows other people to comprehend and respond to said experiences. When others can understand and internalize these experiences they relate these experiences to their own. If a person is able to have their experiences understood by others, their experiences become more real and validated, as they become more tangible and comprehensible. This suggests that language is the tool that one uses to make sense of that which occurs in life. However, this also suggests that, if a person does not have access to a certain type of experience or to a certain aspect of the language, they cannot properly communicate their experiences and cannot have these experiences validated by others. For example, the French language, in its grammatical structure, limits some experiences in their ability to be expressed.

### FRENCH LANGUAGE

As in other languages, to understand the French language in a sociological and sociolinguistic sense, one must first look at the speech community within the French language. As French is a

language spoken around the world, there is no set “French” community or “French” dialect that is officially the standard within the language. However, as French sociolinguistic theorists argue, Paris, as the center of the Francophone world, should be seen as the city that sets the linguistic standard. Francard (1993) argues that “the French of Paris is generally seen as the most legitimate dialect, compared to which other dialects are positioned as subordinate” (14). This means that, when looking at the speech community of the French language, Paris has the most power. As it is also the center of the French government, the city of Paris further dictates both what is legally sanctioned and what is seen as socially normal within French society. For example, the French language’s vocabulary and grammatical structure are maintained through the power of the French language in the heart of France.

The French language, much like other Romance languages, has a grammatical gender, or that objects in the language are gendered male or female, adjective spelling and pronunciation is changed depending on the gender of its subject, and the endings of past participles are changed depending on the gender of the subject. Despite the Académie française having declared that “French has two genres, traditionally referred to as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’” (*Féminisation des titres et des fonctions* 1984), implications of the language as a binary structure in and-of-itself is lacking at best. Most discourse on the language as a binary when looking at the structure of the language explains that the “dichotomous... categorization seems so obvious, so ‘natural,’ that many people take it totally for granted” (Ahearn 2012:189). In other words, the language is assumed to be a binary and people do not question this fact of the language. This, though, is not critiqued often (if at all) in scholarly writing, and reflects the importance the French give to the French language and its purity.

French society and those in power in France regard the language as being one of the most important aspects of French culture. Historically, the French have gone to great lengths to ensure that the language does not change greatly in order to ensure that the language stays, in their view, pure. They, via the Académie française, have standardized and systematized what is “proper” in the language and make clear what words are an accepted part of the language and which violate the norms and are therefore incorrect. The end goal of these efforts “is homogeneity; consequently, nonstandard usage is always to some degree improper... the most valued form of a language is to be found in the community’s ‘best’ authors, as defined by the esthetic values of the dominant cultural tradition; and... this form of the language is inherently *better* than other varieties” (Fleischman 1997:840). In other words, the discourse around and dedication towards maintaining the structure and purity of the French language comes from a small group in power and is intended to create a divide between proper language and improper language. This divide and the fact that there is a set group of people who are in charge of the maintenance of the French language has created what some call a “super norm” which has “become inextricably bound up with, and come to stand for, the French national identity, French culture, and France’s position—or erstwhile position—in the world” (Fleischman 1997:840).

This shows that the language creates two divides through the way it is maintained. The first divide is between France and the rest of the world, as the way the language does not change is seen as a symbol of some sort of superiority over other nations and other languages that, the Académie française would argue, is caused by too great of an influence from other cultures and foreign ideas. The second divide comes within the French-speaking population itself, where there are people within the language and language culture who, those in power would argue, deviate from the norm and are therefore breaking down French culture. These two divides have been

studied before by sociolinguists, and one suggests that the discourse surrounding the language explains

“why language change in general is so highly politicized in France, fueling public outcry and debate to a degree unparalleled among speech communities. What I wish to suggest is that the tension surrounding language issues in France-whether these have to do with gender, with borrowing (notably from English), or with orthographic reform, all of which have spawned major public debates in France in recent years-derives from a fundamental clash of ideologies that pits language change against an edifice of beliefs and subjective attitudes about language, specifically about the French language, that has long been subsumed under the doctrinal umbrella of *bon usage*” (Fleischman 1997:835).

In other words, because of discourse surrounding the language and because of institutions such as the Académie française, the language and pushes to change the French language are highly politicized to such an extent that it is and should be seen as an outlier. These debates over whether and how much to change the language represent the historical views about the importance of the language and its ability to remain highly uninfluenced by other languages. This lack of changing the language, to the French, historically provides an example of the society’s unwillingness to change its ideologies for the sake of maintaining cultural ideologies.

For example, one study compares how non-binary people who speak languages with a grammatical gender and languages without a grammatical gender feel about their respective languages. Overwhelmingly, people expressed that they felt less comfortable in languages in which the grammar is binary. One transgender French/English bilingual person in a study on the influence of gender in language in gender expression explains that,

“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)” (Hord 2016:23).

Their response suggests that the language both influences the ability of people to be able to understand that there can be neutral (or even trans) gender identities, as the languages makes the explanation of these identities difficult at best. One of the reasons that being a binary trans

person in the language is still influenced by the language is because of how the language and its ties of gender to the body are discussed. These authors explain 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’” (Hord 2016:7). This means that, when a person’s gender does not match the one that is used to refer to them in the language, the burden is put on the person and not the language. This means that, even though the French language is supposed to serve the needs and to be used as an expression of the experiences of the person speaking the language, the person has failed since their gender deviates from the norms that exist within the language.

This study further suggested that, even if people would like to change the language, they often have a hard time when trying to find ways around the traditions within the language. The author, Hord (2016), explains that, “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.” (17). In other words, people have options for gender neutral language in languages such as English but are unable to find an equivalent substitution in French. This lack of the availability of gender neutral terms in French causes people to feel as though expressing themselves in the language is “really painful... because of the lack of trans history in the use of language” (Hord 2016:23), meaning that the language’s historical lack of willingness to change makes the language unwelcoming and as though a group of people is being erased. This lack of terminology for gender terms becomes important when looking at the importance of gender identity in the self.



## GENDER IDENTITY

If language allows people to express their experiences to others, then language also allows people to understand how society verbally communicates norms and rules within a group.

Learning the norms within a society becomes important in shaping a person's self-identity (Cooley 1902), meaning that the development of a self-identity is in part based on language community.

When understanding how a person views the world, one must look at multiple different facets of their identity. According to sociological theory, a "social identity is a person's knowledge that he or she belongs to a social category or group" (Stets and Burke 2000:225). This concept of identity "self-categorization" (Keener 2015: 482) has two important parts. The first is that a social category or group already exists that is comprised of people with one or more common factor and that the people within the group can recognize each other as having these commonalities. The second is that a person is aware that they belong to the social group. If a person does not have knowledge either that the group exists or that there are other people who have the similar identity, they cannot have the identity until they gain this awareness. A person, in other words, must be able to identify themselves as a part of the group. This identity "can be as complex or as simple as you desire. But no one can give you this identity" (Galupo et al. 2014:440). This identity allows a person to better understand themselves both as an individual and as a member of their identity group.

Becoming a member of an identity group allows a person to understand the norms associated with the specific group which, in turn, shapes the way a person will behave. This self-categorization creates an "accentuation of the perceived similarities between the self and other in-group members, and an accentuation of the perceived differences between the self and out-

group members. This accentuation occurs for all the attitudes, beliefs and values, affective reactions, behavioral norms, styles of speech, and other properties that are believed to be correlated with the relevant intergroup categorization” (Stets and Burke 2000:225). In other words, identifying as a member of a certain group shapes how a person views the world, as they start to see similarities between themselves and other members of the group and differences between their identity group and other identity groups. The norms and behaviors of the group shape the norms and behavior of the individual.

This is explained by Cooley (1902) who explains how groups influence how people perceive themselves and behave. Cooley writes that

“A self-idea of this sort seems to have three principal elements: the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification... The things that moves us to pride or shame is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves but an imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this reflection upon another’s mind” (2).

In other words, a person’s identity is part how they see themselves, part how they believe society will see them, and a reaction to this that inspires them to either change the way they behave or inspires them to continue behaving in the same manner. If a person is developing an identity, they see how they behave and aspire to behave in a way that matches what they believe is the norm within a society. People internalize these norms which shapes how they act both outside of and within a society.

One identity that a person carries that greatly shapes their worldview and the ways they interact with others is a person’s gender identity. In this research, the concept of gender will be defined as “the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category” (West and Zimmerman 1987:127) as compared to a biologically essentialist view that equates sex to gender. In other words, gender is a set of norms which society ascribes to a person based on the person’s sex at birth. If a person

has a vagina, then they are assigned or designated female at birth (AFAB or DFAB) and if a person has a penis, they are assigned or designated male at birth (AMAB or DMAB). These binary categories are created and assumed to dictate how a person is expected to behave within a society. Gender expectations shape the behavior of people for the vast majority of their lives.

Gender is a part of a person's identity that they generally understand at a young age, as "children are able to correctly identify their gender by 2 years of age, understand that their gender remains stable across time by 4 years of age, and understand their gender to be constant and independent of external features by 7 years of age" (Katz-Wise et al. 2017: 244). People generally understand what their gender means as a child, and this is generally due to outside influences, such as family, school, and the media. One of the most influential outside sources that influences how gender develops comes from the language in which people grow up speaking.

In a monolingual household (compared to a bi- or trilingual household), a person's understanding of gender will be shaped by the singular language that is spoken, as this is the set of vocabulary and grammatical norms to which they have access. Gender is developed through language by the means of categorization. In other words, when developing gender in language, a person will label their experiences and behaviors as being more masculine or feminine (Cahill 2009). As a person identifies their own gender at a young age, they start to categorize their practices and feelings as being either masculine or feminine. Cooley (1902)'s theories on identity development and Gumperz (1968)'s theories about speech-community would then suggest that a person, in developing their gender, would turn towards the categories of gender that are established within the language they speak. The person sees what ideas are available and tries to see how their particular speech community would categorize their potential actions and thoughts.

The person internalizes how they believe the speech-community would view them and acts according to what they believe to be the norm within the speech-community. For example, a woman could think about both using, and how her speech community would respond to her use of the “he/him/his” pronouns. These thoughts based on norms in the speech community reinforce gender norms and may further a person’s gender identity development.

Once a person has this understanding of what their gender means, this knowledge shapes how they act. Gender is “a multidimensional construct that includes an individual’s knowledge of belonging in a gender category, experienced compatibility with that particular category, felt pressure to conform, and attitudes toward gender groups” (Katz-Wise et al. 2017: 244). In other words, a person’s gender is comprised of their belonging, or a feeling of belonging, in a group and the ways that they act or believe they should act in order to ensure that they share enough mutual values or behaviors with the group. Though norms of binary gender identities such as being a woman or being a man are well established and well-studied, other gender identities are not studied as frequently.

### NON-BINARY GENDERS

Though gender is a spectrum, assumptions of gender as a binary pervade many aspects of society, including much research that is done on gender identity. This leads to non-binary identities, or identities that are on the gender spectrum and lie somewhere between “man” and “woman,” not being represented in gender studies. One of the reasons that the gender binary is so prevalent is because of the historical assumption that a person’s gender corresponds with their biological sex. The gender binary “implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it. When the constructed status of

gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice” (Hines 2007:22). This quote explains that the assumption of gender as a binary system suggests that gender should be linked directly to sex, but when one unlinks the two, one can better study gender as an independent field. Studying certain types of gender identities that go against the idea of gender as a binary are often seen as “[rupturing] existing gender and sexual identities, and have been regarded as the epitome of identity deconstruction” (Hines 2007:25). Looking at gender as having valid non-binary identities shifts discourse regarding gender so greatly in part because it is a full separation from looking at gender as another representation of biological sex. Instead, gender is studied solely as a socially constructed entity and is completely removed from being based on biological sex.

The process of identifying as a non-binary person is one that often starts at a young age and is often filled with self-doubt. Research on trans youth explains that binary gender socialization starts early, which causes in non-binary youth “an early sense of body-mind dissonance” (Katz-Wise et al. 2017: 244). A person must deal with the gender and gender expectations that are assigned to them based on their body while at the same time navigating the feelings that the gender that is assigned to them is incorrect. This differs from what is seen as “normal” gender socialization, as children are expected to learn what their gender is and then model their behavior to fit their gender category.

This difference explains why, according to research, when developing their identities, many trans children go through a period that is “focused on gender conflict, isolation, and confusion related to a feeling that one was essentially different from other children of the same sex” (Levitt and Ippolito 2014: 1729). This time is one in which the children must navigate between believing the gender norms that are being expected of them do not match with how they

feel and wanting to fit in with their peers. Often, if non-binary children or teens violate these gender norms, they experience “anxiety at the point of early identity development” (Testa et al. 2013: 41). This suggests that a non-cisgender child’s knowledge of not having the same gender as their peers is something of which they are aware and becomes a problem they must navigate.

Further, the process of navigating gender identity and expression during this time is one that is filled with conflicting ideals. If one is to express their gender, they may be acting in a way that more properly expresses how they feel, but they may become ostracized or bullied. If they express the gender they are assigned at birth, they may be more accepted by their peers but they may be acting contrary to how they feel. One theorist describes this navigation of identity as trans people “balancing a desire for authenticity with demands of necessity—meaning that they weighed their internal gender experience with considerations about their available resources, coping skills, and the consequences of gender transition” (Levitt and Ippolito 2014:1727). Gender is a visible identity that people have, and gender deviance is a form of deviance that often inspires ostracization and violence, making non-binary people a population that is both at risk and understudied.

Despite gender being such a visible identity, there are few opportunities for trans people to see representations of other trans people in the media and in powerful positions in society. In one study of identity development among trans people, respondents often “lack models of nontraditional gender to aid them in their identity development, and some... described believing that they were alone in their gender struggles due to the paucity of public acknowledgment” (Levitt and Ippolito 2014:1728). In other words, though gender is in so many aspects of life and society, people who start to question their gender have few actual people to whom they can turn to understand their gender, unlike girls looking to their mothers and boys looking to their fathers.

This problem is furthered by the lack of representation of trans people in media and the lack of quality of trans people when representation exists. In the same study, “nearly one third of the participants emphasized the inhibitory impact that negative portrayals in the media had on their coming-out processes. These studies suggest that the inadequate representation of transgender is not simply an issue of quantity but one of quality as well” (Levitt and Ippolito 2014:1729). This means that not only are there not enough opportunities to see models of how to be trans when a child is developing their identity, the opportunities are negative and make the child less comfortable in their potential future than they already are.

One study on identity development shows, however, that learning about their gender identity through learning language regarding gender can make a big difference in people’s understanding. People who have studied identity development in trans youth explain that “learning the term *transgender* and hearing transgender people’s experiences was pivotal in their gender development processes. In hearing these transgender narratives, they realized that a category did indeed exist that represented their experiences of gender and validated their existence” (Levitt and Ippolito 2014:1741). In other words, learning that being transgender is possible by learning language regarding their identities and by learning that there is a community of people with similar genders to them is vital in trans and non-binary identity development. This would suggest that language has power in some instances and is an important aspect of identity and identity development.

Literature regarding power of language brings to light a few key issues. The first is regarding how language is discussed in the majority of sociological writing. Sociologists often use labeling theory and focus simply on the importance of certain labels in identity development. While this is important, this way of thinking leaves a large gap between sociological frameworks

to understand the implications of language structure and linguistic analyses of how the structure of language functions and is reproduced. This paper will attempt to bridge this gap and will attempt to answer a seeming contradiction that comes from the structure of the French language and the nature of non-binary identities.

If the French language and society are highly gendered and unchanging, and if language is necessary to understand and explain one's life experiences and have these experienced recognized and validated by others, then a puzzle arises when looking at how people with non-binary gender identities understand their gender given the constraints of the French language. In other words, how does the gendered nature of the French language and how does language as a system influence the ability of people with non-binary gender identities to understand their own gender?



## **FINDINGS**

For non-binary people who speak French, a lack of access to vocabulary can limit the ability of this group to fully understand and express their own gender, meaning that language as a social construct has power. However, despite the French language being gendered, this language specifically does not influence how non-binary people understands their own gender, as the identity development of non-binary people who speak French follows a similar pattern to non-binary people who speak languages without such a pervasive binary grammatical structure. In other words, language as a construct has power but the French language having a grammatical gender does not have power.

These findings have several implications as explained by respondents.

Language has the ability to prevent people to be able to fully see and recognize their own gender and communicate their gender experiences with others, especially to others who have a similar gender. Finding these gender communities is important, as having a community of people who share the same marginalized identity allows people to learn more about themselves. Within these gender communities are pushes to open up the French language to have their gender recognized in the grammatical structure of the language via the usage of “inclusive” gender neutral language. In what seems like a paradox, however, respondents who would like to see gender neutrality within the language do not see this as a major change despite it disrupting the binary structure of the language. They would like to disrupt the binary gender of pronouns within the language, however not the other manifestations of gender within the language, such as with the gendering of objects in the language. This is because respondents do not see the gendering of

objects in the language, and therefore the majority of grammatical gender in the language, as actual manifestations of gender as a social construct.

As non-disruptive and important as respondents see their desired changes, groups in power such as the Académie française push back against changes in the language towards a more gender-inclusive language.

### LANGUAGE'S INFLUENCE OVER FULLY SEEING AND EXPRESSING THE SELF

For people with non-binary gender identities who speak French, language has the power to prevent people from being able to communicate with others about their own identity and to cause confusion within a person about the validity of their own feelings about their gender. This follows what research on the importance of language in self-comprehension and self-expression has previously suggested. As Chris Weedon writes, "Experience is what we think and feel in any particular situation, and it is expressed in language. Experience is prior to language but requires language in order to be communicated to other people" (1997: 81).

This further connects with identity theory within sociology. Cooley (1902) argues that people act as a reaction to how they believe society expects them to act. If a person has certain experiences and feelings but does not know how to act because there are no social norms to dictate their actions, they might feel lost. Further, having feelings and experiences that directly go against what society expects them to do would cause a person to feel invalidated, as the social norms that they have internalized now conflict with their lived experiences. This means that, without language to express one's experiences, a person does not have the opportunity to use the concepts of the language to inform how they will shape their identity.

Language allows people to express their feelings and experiences to others, though having an experience is not predicated on having the language to express these experiences. If

one does not have the proper words to explain a feeling, one becomes stuck feeling alone and as though the feelings cannot possibly exist. Even with the existence of the internet and easy access to information worldwide, if one does not have the language to search for the answers to the questions they ask about their own gender, one cannot start the search process. Because of language, a person, then, can become isolated from themselves and their own body.

This gap between one's feelings and the language that they can use to express themselves can be seen by respondents, the majority of whom experienced feelings of being non-binary long before learning the words to describe their gender. For example, respondents describe feeling as though they did not fit into the limiting binary gender categories, but that they did not believe that these feelings could be valid and instead thought these feelings were irrational. Nino, a respondent, explained that "I was not comfortable in the box 'woman' and 'man' but I told myself that it was just in my head." Here, one can see that feelings of being non-binary are still prevalent in respondents before they learned about the possibility of being non-binary. This response also brings to light another key finding: people can have feelings about their identity without having the language to explain these experiences.

David Haines (2017), explains this by saying that a person can experience an emotion without having the words to describe the emotion, but that it is harder to explain to others these (or any) emotions, so even if people have the same experiences, there is a divide between people who can understand each other and those who cannot. This suggests that the language does not have the power to prevent people from having feelings and thoughts. Rather, language has the power to prevent people from being able to describe these feelings and validate these thoughts.

These feelings of being non-binary before having the language to describe these feelings are echoed by Mélissa who explains that, "even before learning about gender, I felt non-binary, I

very simply did not have the word to describe it.” This same sentiment is explained by Dylan who says, “I did not know how to say ‘what I was’ since I did not have the words.” In other words, people felt as though they knew that the gender which they were assigned at birth did not match the one with which they felt as though they should identify. They did not have the ability to learn about these feelings, however, as they did not know that these feelings could be put into words. In theory, then, learning language to express one’s feelings should make a large difference in a person’s understanding of their identity.

One can see in respondents’ explanations of the importance of the term “non-binary” how important having language is in understanding the self. When they learned this specific term, many respondents noticed an immediate change as though they were able to understand their own feelings fully for the first time. Elliott, after learning the term “non-binary,” explained how excited they were about “finally having a word that explained my feelings. The respondent expresses that they had very real and substantive beliefs about their own gender that were unable to be validated or explained without the proper language to express it. Elliott later explained that, after learning this word, “its significance has not really changed for me since.” This further suggests that the word had such an important influence on the respondent’s life that they still see the word as being as important to them now as it was to them then when they first learned that their gender was a real possibility.

The strong fondness with which they regard this word is not unique to this respondent, as many others described how important this word was in their process of discovering their gender and validating the feelings they had understood but been unable to express. Rose explained that they learned the word and “very quickly felt ‘ah yes, that, that’s me that corresponds to my identity, I’m happy to have found this label,’ this has never changed since.” This respondent had

such an immediate moment where they finally were able to feel validated in their gender and were able to use language to express to others the feelings they had not yet been able to express even to themselves fully before. Even when a person does not have as fixed of a gender identity, learning the terminology related to being non-binary is important in identity development. For example, Gavin explains that learning the word “non-binary” helped them “comprehend my gender (which is complex due to the fact that it is fluid).” Even though Gavin’s gender changes regularly, the word still had a salient influence on their identity development and allowed them to better understand all of the intricacies of their own gender which had been difficult at best to explain until that point.

This lack of access to words then turns into a lack of knowledge as to how a person should act. Oscar explains that they always “felt as though I was not a girl (my assigned gender) but I also did not consider myself a man so I did not know very much how to live in a way that is binary” but when they learned the word “non-binary,” they “were certain that this applied to me. I could put a name to my feelings... it allowed me to move forward.” This suggests that the respondent felt lost because of the conflict between how they felt and the options that they believed were available to them. They believed that they could only chose between being a man and a woman despite feeling as though they are not exclusively one or the other, meaning that, because of their knowledge about their gender because of a lack of language, they were prevented from both speaking about their experiences and acting in a way that matches their feelings of how their gender should be performed. Gender is not simply the usage of a pronoun or dressing a certain way but is the ability of a person to identify and recognize gender in themselves and the ability to have others understand and recognize this gender as well.

There are few exceptions to the pattern of respondents immediately hearing the word “non-binary,” immediately identifying with the word, and feeling a great deal of clarity as to the validity of their gender. One of the few reasons that this pattern did not occur in some respondents is due to another word having the same influence. For example, Pierre explains that “the word Queer has more significance for me because that is how I first identified for nearly a year. Now I more often use the word non-binary, or NB (the abbreviation) because it better describes my feelings than Queer.” Despite the respondent not having the same response to the word “non-binary” as other respondents, they still mostly fit the same pattern exhibited by others, as they strongly identify with one word that gave them a significant amount of clarity on their gender and as using these terms allows them to clearly express their gender.

The other exception to this pattern comes from two people who experienced similar patterns with their understandings of their gender. These two respondents, before learning the term “non-binary,” had not questioned their gender but realized they were non-binary after learning the term. Mélissa explains,

first I met some non-binary people of different sexes and I thought it was great that they took away gender. I then asked myself ‘What would I do if someone gendered me as a man?’ My response was: that wouldn’t bother me... maybe it would please me... maybe that would relieve me!

Though Mélissa, who now identifies as non-binary, had not had internal turmoil regarding their gender before, learning about being non-binary by learning the terminology and by meeting non-binary people had such a large influence on their life that it caused them to start questioning their gender in ways they had never done before. Lucie explained that they did

not have particularly special feelings when they learned the word ‘non-binary.’ I was researching at the time for information on trans people for a friend who was questioning their gender and because I sorely lacked vocabulary about this question. I asked myself if I was trans, but because of my very feminine appearance and my feeling of belonging in the oppressed class of women, I had long put these feelings beside. I had a flash of

revelation when I realized that I hated being called a woman or a girl or... I asked my partner to use neutral terms instead.

This respondent, though they had questioned their gender before, had another realization that they were trans when they started to access terminology related to being trans and non-binary. This shows that, even when someone already feels as though they understand their gender, learning the words to describe different gender identities validates prior feelings people had of confusion and discontent in their gender and can lead them to start identifying as non-binary or at least to start using gender-neutral terms to refer to themselves. These cases are rarer, however, as most respondents would agree with Elliot's declamation, "this word changed my life!"

Pierre expresses a similar level of enthusiasm and explains that "the word itself, I discovered it late. The first term I was told about was Genderqueer, and it was very precious to me! All of a sudden, I was feeling an existence, a legitimacy, and other people were living the same thing." Even though this respondent did not personally have a community of people with whom they shared a gender, they felt as though, since there is a word that exists to describe their gender, this word must be based on more than one person having the same feelings and needing a way to communicate these shared feelings to others with the same sentiments.

#### LANGUAGE'S INFLUENCE OVER THE SELF AS A MEMBER OF A COMMUNITY AND THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY IN IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

In the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, the whole world only spoke one language. People decided to build a tower to reach the heavens, so God made every person speak a different language so they could no longer understand each other and had to give up their plan (Gen 11 1:9 NIV). This story illustrates one of the most important tenants of language: language functions as it allows people to use common understandings and expressions of the same idea. Without this

mutual understanding, language does not function. One theorist explains this as a divide between “people we can understand and those we cannot” (Haines 2017: 223). If there is not this mutual understanding of a concept, then language has not served its purpose of allowing the mutual understanding of a concept or experience. This means, then, that concepts that are to be expressed must be put into more general categories in order for people to understand them despite large variations existing within the category (such as “chair” which can describe furniture items of a large range of sizes, shapes, and materials). The same can be said for gender categories, the idea of “woman” can encompass people of all different races, ages, body types, etc. Nonetheless, this category legitimizes the existence of the concept and allows for the concept to be allowed to be distinct from other concepts and groups, allowing for feelings of solidarity and inclusion in the group.

However, if a person does not know that a word exists or that a category exists, they are prevented from feeling as though they are a part of the group and from being able to identify with the group, or they are denied their own community. This lack of ability to look towards a community in order to understand and develop gender norms becomes crucial when looking at sociological theory on identity development. Little research within the sociology of identity development focuses on gender, as gender identity development is more often analyzed through social psychology. However, Mead (1934)’s theories on identity development can be applied to gender in this context. Mead argues that what one sees as the self is not simply a stagnant being. Rather, a person is both influenced by the behavior of people around them and the norms they believe exist within a society. A person, in interacting with others in society, comes up with what Mead describes as the “generalized other” (Mead 1934:42). This is what a person sees as the mindset of and norms within a group in society. The self turns towards the ideals they see



reflected (or at least believe are reflected) in the generalized other and uses this information to shape their behavior. By doing this and “by taking the role of other and seeing ourselves for others’ perspectives, our responses come to be like others’ responses, and the meaning of the self becomes a shared meaning” (Stets and Burk 2017, 4). In other words, when a person develops their own identity, they look towards others and the norms within the community in which they exist to dictate the ways they will behave. Therefore, without having a community of people with a similar gender, they are without access to these norms and are hindered from developing their sense of self.

Many respondents express that they felt as though they had no community before learning the term “non-binary.” If access to community influences identity development and language can prevent access to community, then language therefore influences identity development. Often this is expressed by respondents who talk about feelings of confusion in their gender and loneliness. For example, Dylan explains that, before having the language to understand and talk about their gender, they felt “isolated because I could not be named.” Here, the respondent expresses that having the words to explain their gender is important as this allows them to be able to identify with a larger gender group. Further, without having the language to describe their gender, their gender category is not being legitimized, meaning that, although the language exists, it cannot serve its purpose of communicating a concept to others. However, this

After people feel alone in their gender because of a lack of knowledge about the existence of people who share a gender with them, the discovery of the term non-binary allows them to find a community of people to whom they can turn to further their gender identity development. This is explained in one of the main studies of identity development of trans people, which states that “it was upon finding their first affirming social group that many

interviewees... found the courage to explore their own gender... In addition, some interviewees ( $n = 7$ ) described how, upon finding a community of transgender people, they realized that they were not alone in their gender struggles” (Levitt and Ippolito 2014:1740). In other words, community become important in identity development as people not only learn that their gender is valid but that there are others who have gone through similar struggles in their gender to whom they can turn to better understand their gender identities.

For most of the respondents, as soon as they learned the word “non-binary,” not only did they gain an understanding that their own identity is valid, but they also learned that there are other people who identify with the same gender, meaning that, even though they may not know anybody personally who in the non-binary community, that one still exists. For some, this community exists in real life. This matches previous studies on gender identity development which explain that learning a term such as “non-binary” allows people to realize “a category did indeed exist that represented their experiences of gender and validated their existence” (Levitt and Ippolito 2014:1741). If a category does exist to explain a gender, it is because enough people identify with this gender category, meaning that people have a community to whom they can turn to better understand their gender. These communities can exist in real life, though they often exist primarily online.

One respondent explains that, for them, they found a community in a real, physical location. Elliott explains that they “met a few trans people before when I started to frequent the LGBTI center in my town.” Here, a physical space exists that can serve as a community center for people who have similar genders and to whom people can talk and turn for support. However, for most respondents, the most common place that they find their community is online,

specifically a Facebook group called “NB Francophone: Non-Binaire, Queer, Androgyne, Fluide, Agenre, Xénogène..” ([www.facebook.com/groups/643312325711630](https://www.facebook.com/groups/643312325711630)).

This Facebook group as of April 2018 has over 3,000 members and describes itself as “for Francophone people who have an identity that is trans and/or non-binary. Non-binary, that is to say, to consider oneself as having an identity, such as, for example, androgynous, gender-fluid (fluid), genderqueer or agender—in other words, not being or not being only or completely, a man or a woman or masculine or feminine” ([www.facebook.com/groups/643312325711630](https://www.facebook.com/groups/643312325711630)). This community, though online, still provides people with a source of community that many see as extremely valuable and influential in their development. Despite no survey questions directly asking about this Facebook group, over a dozen respondents made reference to this online community.

For some, this group provided the first opportunity to explore their gender. Gavin explained that “the first time I saw this term [non-binary], it was in discovering the name of the group FB NB francophones. My first thought was ‘I found my place here, I will feel good being here.’” Their response touches on a few important aspects of the power of language. The first is that they first gained clarity from learning the term “non-binary” and immediately understood their gender. The second is that they felt at ease once they learned the term because at the same time they were learning that they already had a community to which they could turn so that they could learn more about their gender and so that they would not be alone in their gender anymore. Finally, they learned that not all communities have to be spaces in real life in order to be valid and influential. These spaces still provide outlets for people to come together over their shared gender in a space where they know they will be accepted.

Most explained that this was one of the only communities in which they felt validated, such as Mathis who said that they felt the most supported “on the internet in groups dedicated [to being non-binary].” Having this space by and for trans and non-binary people proves to be important, as this is a concrete group where they know that every member is a part of their gender community. This sentiment is furthered by David who describes finding the most support in “Facebook groups, especially those that fight against oppression, have non-oppressive humor, or non-[gender] mixed spaces are more reassuring than the world around me” (David). Here, one can see the importance of finding a community of people with a similar or the same gender. Identity formation relies so heavily on being able to understand the point of view and norms of a person’s community, meaning that having a concrete space where every person is of the same gender and where they can establish norms allows people to more easily form their identity.

Further, having this space allows people to find the changes they wish to see in the world. Oscar explains that, in this Facebook group, “I feel respected. People ask for my pronouns and listen to my concerns.” These efforts to be more inclusive within the group come as responses from the outside world where people suggest that they do not feel respected and as though people in the outside world want to actually know about their identity instead of just assuming their gender.

However, some non-binary people have problems with using these pronouns that are accepted solely within these online communities. The biggest problem that respondents expressed was the divide that is emphasized between these online communities and the rest of the world. Gavin talks about how the language and society are too “binary” and prevent people from seeing themselves represented while these online communities are the only places where people see the changes that they would like made. Because of this divide between the “inclusive”

and “exclusive” spaces, these communities that are inclusive are not accessible to non-LGBTQ+ people. Having these spaces allows for a comfortable place where members can feel supported without judgment or discomfort from non-LGBTQ+ people, however these divides make the LGBTQ+ community very, as Julia explains, “closed” due to the lack of trust that some non-binary people have towards cisgender people. Very few respondents, though, complained that the space was too closed, as the majority focused more on how happy they were to have a community where they could freely use language to express their own gender and could have others not only recognize the language and their gender but relate to these identities as well. This, then, would suggest that, though language can make people feel invisible and can prevent people from being recognized, it is not infallible. Language has power but, like other social constructs, can be changed to reflect the norms of a society. When this change happens, people can have a more accessible source to which they can turn to understand how they are expected to behave, such as access to norms of gender expression.

### LANGUAGE’S INFLUENCE OF HOW PEOPLE ACT

Gender expression is both the way a person shows their gender to the world and the way in which other members of society interpret a person’s gender. How a person performs their gender is a facet of gender identity, and understanding the role of language on these actions helps understand how gender within language influences identity development.

As important as learning terminology regarding non-binary gender identities proves to be and as important as having a community of people with similar gender identities is, there is no pattern of respondents greatly changing their behavior or appearance after discovering their identity. One reason that this response is logical is because of the nature of being non-binary. Though in most cases for people with transgender identities, the marker for when a person has

“completed” their transition to another gender is marked by sex reassignment surgery (Galupo, Henise, Mercer 2016), there is no concrete marker for non-binary people.

Further, there is no one set of ideals to which people are expected to ascribe when they are non-binary, meaning that a person must rely heavily on their own sense of what their gender means (Keener 2015). Because of this, people who are non-binary do not have to fit a defined mold of gender presentation, nor are there a specific set of ways that non-binary people are expected to act. This would explain why these respondents often do not change their behavior, aside from potentially using different pronouns, as they have not gained knowledge of a new mold that they should fit based on their new gender

Another reason cited for a lack of changing behavior greatly after discovering one’s identity comes with the emotional energy that comes with having to explain and justify one’s identity to everyone frequently and feelings of being unsafe if one comes out. Some, such as Gabriel, “do not explain my identity” at all while others “avoid it as often as possible, but, when I do, in discussion I take it with a grain of salt” (Nino). Some people see this as an emotional burden, as often French people are un- or under-educated on gender issues in society and in the language, so to them, explaining their gender is not worth the amount of trouble and stress that it causes. Further, other respondents discuss concerns about safety regarding discussing and presenting their identity. Raphael-Leslie explains that “I avoid presenting my non-binary identity to strangers. This could be dangerous.” Édith “to strangers I do not really, only if someone asks me ‘are you a boy or a girl’ I respond, ‘I am neither one nor the other’ if I feel safe. For friends and family I try to explain it to them more specifically.” These responses further suggest that gender deviance is not well regarded in France and that not following these norms could cause the respondents physical harm or could cause them to become isolated.

This fear is not unfounded, as Chlo  , after initially trying to present as another gender than the one they were assigned at birth, was rejected by “everyone...I lost my girlfriend, my parents, my friends, I found myself on the street for 2 years.” Coming out and presenting as another gender can be unsafe for people, meaning that the choice to come out as non-binary is one that is personal and should not be taken lightly.

However, there are also respondents who choose to explain and present their identities to people they meet and to their family and friends. Julia uses images, saying that they “I like to illustrate it with an image of a line, a woman on one side and a man on the other and a person who walks on the line from one side to the other.” This visual image presents the idea that there can be genders between the two that are currently viewed as the exclusive options. This explanation of gender being a spectrum is common in explanations of how people explain their gender when they choose to do so. Paul explains, “I say that I do not feel like a man or a woman or between the two,” bringing to light the idea that there are gender identities such as being agender that transcend both the gender binary and the gender spectrum. With the wide range of gender identities comes a wide range of ways and levels to which people explain their gender in French language ranging from not discussing their gender to using visual imagery. Efforts towards changing the French language, respondents hope, will make these explanations easier, these efforts promote more widespread access to gender-neutral vocabulary and grammatical structures in the Francophone community.

### EFFORTS TO CHANGE THE FRENCH LANGUAGE

There are efforts to change the French language to include more gender-neutral pronouns and adjective-endings. These changes are important because of the ties of language to identity

development. As Cooley (1902) argues, the social norms that exist within a society greatly dictate the way in which a person develops and expresses their identity. When a person does not have access to certain terminology or ideas within the society, they often feel lost as they cannot turn to the social norms to understand their experiences. However, efforts to change the French language show opportunities for the society to change to include identities that were previously inaccessible or difficult to access for the majority of people within the society. By making language more inclusive and these terms more commonly found, people hope that they will be able to provide a part of society (that previously did not exist) to which others can turn when developing their own identities.

Despite how important these changes are to respondents, currently, many non-binary people feel frustrated that the efforts to make the language more inclusive seem to be limited to LGBTQ+ and online communities which seem to be the most common (and in some cases only) places where non-binary people feel as though they are understood and seen. This suggests that language has the power over non-binary people when they cannot change the language to include words that reference and express their gender. Otherwise, in these inclusive spaces, the language is modeled and changed based on the needs of non-binary people, meaning that they gain power back over the language.

Respondents overwhelmingly said that they do not feel supported by the French language. When asked why, Marine said that this was due to the language “missing gender neutral pronouns.” This is significant because, if there is no word to be used to refer to a person, their identity cannot be discussed meaning that their gender and the struggles therein are erased. This feeling of erasure is common among respondents, many of whom explain that they do not feel as though the language wants to recognize their existence. For example, Robin explains that



French “makes a lot of non-binary genders invisible” as the language does not have a way to express in writing or speech that a person has a gender-neutral identity. David states that “we do not have, in my opinion, our own place in the French language which totally excludes us. We simply don’t exist.” These complaints about the language do not discuss the grammatical gender of objects in the language. Rather, the complaints deal with the lack of recognition that there are pronouns aside from *il(s)* and *elle(s)* and adjective forms that express non-binary genders and a lack of widely-known terminology to discuss non-binary genders.

When asked if they feel supported in the French language, Robin explained that they do not “which is why I use inclusive language to refer to myself, but this is not a recognized part of the French language yet.” Changing the language and recognizing these pronouns would validate the existence of non-binary genders, therefore a lack of recognition suggests that the genders are not real enough to be validated. Further, Matilde said that, even for the most common terms and pronouns regarding being non-binary, they are “known by very few” because “the French language does little to support people who are non-binary/the state of being non-binary.” Without widespread terminology, people have to search harder access the language needed to express non-binary identities, potentially slowing or stopping people from being able to put words to their own identity. This shows the power of language as a structure, as having a lack of access to terminology such as words regarding being non-binary and gender-neutral pronouns can influence how a person develops their identity.

One of the most cited reasons as to why the French language does not support non-binary people and identities comes from a decree from the Académie française which say any changes to include different adjective endings and noun forms to include women and non-binary people are incorrect. This type of writing is called “inclusive writing” and often is seen as an effort that

mainly serves to put women and men on equal standing in the French language, however many respondents see this as a necessary first step towards changing the language in a way that benefits them more greatly by creating discourse about ways to make the French language more inclusive. For example, Gavin explains that “inclusive writing is a form of the French language (non-official, activist) that allows the integration of non-binary people, even if it is often seen exclusively as a means of equality between men and women (yes ... but not only).” This suggests that efforts to change the language often do not come in the form of official doctrine but come from activist groups pushing against those in power. Further, the efforts made are designed to create gender equality for men and women; however these changes also serve to benefit trans and non-binary people as they allow for different adjective and noun endings to exist that represent a wider range of gender identities aside from masculine.

However, there has been great pushback from the Académie française against these changes. In October 2017, the Académie released a statement which said the following:

Taking note of the spread of an "inclusive writing" that claims to be the norm, the French Academy unanimously raises a solemn warning. The multiplication of the orthographic and syntactic marks that it induces leads to a disunited language, disparate in its expression, creating a confusion which borders on illegibility. It is unclear what the goal is and how it could overcome the practical barriers of writing, reading - visual or aloud - and pronunciation. This would weigh on the task of the pedagogues. This would further complicate that of readers.

More than any other institution, the French Academy is sensitive to developments and innovations in the language, since its mission is to codify them. On this occasion, it is less a guardian of the norm than a guarantor of the future that it raises a cry of alarm: in front of this "inclusive" aberration, the French language is now in deadly danger, which our nation is now accountable to future generations.

It is already difficult to acquire a language, what will happen if the use adds to it second and altered forms? How will future generations grow in intimacy with our written heritage? As for the promises of the Francophonie, they will be destroyed if the French language prevents itself by this duplication of complexity, for the benefit of other languages that will take advantage to prevail on the planet.

In doing this, the Académie, the group who have the power over the French language, rejects the idea that there could possibly be another gender and suggests that, should the language change to become more inclusive, these changes would destroy the language itself and would destroy French society. In fact, this declamation goes so far as to call this new shift dangerous and suggests that the changes that non-binary people try to make are both destroying the history of the language and destroying its potential future.

The attempts of the Académie to prevent French from having gender-inclusive language exemplify the problems about which non-binary people speak when discussing why they feel so unsupported in the language. For example, Théo speaks of how “people who use gender-neutral pronouns are not recognized (iel, ol, al, ael...) it’s very difficult and unjust” while Rose uses English examples and wish for “an equivalent to ‘they/them’ singular.” These changes, despite going against the will of the Académie, would allow people to recognize themselves in the French language, as it would legitimize their gender and the fact that their gender communities do exist.

However, these changes are not widely being enacted in most parts of society, meaning that people have two options. The first option is that they constantly correct people, an option to which some non-binary people turn. Many give up on this quickly, as Pierre states that “often the terms created by non-binary people are not well known” and people “often do not have the energy to explain.” The other option is to turn inward and rely on smaller LGBTQ+ communities for support, as they can take control over the language outside of the reign of the Académie française. Even places where the Académie does not have full control, such as other Francophone nations, are not exempt from this problem. Robin explains that “France is very conservative [regarding gender in their language] and it is a bit the same in Switzerland, even

though, as we are a multilingual country, maybe we have a little more liberty regarding the French language (less influence of the Académie française, etc...).” Even though Switzerland and France speak the same language, the attitudes towards gender in the language are different because different forces control the language. Gender itself within the language does not have power, but the forces that control the gender in the language and can change the national dialogue surrounding gender in the language do have power. This shows that, in many instances, the fact that French has a binary grammatical structure does not matter in a person’s identity development and self-comprehension.

#### WHEN LANGUAGE IS NOT IMPORTANT

Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that the gendered nature of the French language as it corresponds to objects being gendered (such as a table being “feminine”) does not matter to them, as this is simply the way the language is structured and should not try to be changed. Little to no research has been done on this specific question of whether or not French being so gendered influences how easily people can understand their own gender, so these findings do not specifically confirm to or refute any one piece of literature studied in this study. However, research on trans and non-binary people who are English/French bilingual does suggest that communication of these concepts of gender neutrality and being non-binary are much more difficult in heavily gendered languages (Hord 2016). This suggests that expressing and having gender neutral terms integrated into societal norms is harder with languages that have an established grammatical gender. However, neither this study nor any other modern sociological study touches on whether the grammar of the French language should be seen as “gender” in the

same way as it is seen when applied to people in society. When asked this question, respondents in this study, when asked, largely said no.

Victor explained that “honestly, when speaking French, you don’t really pay much attention to the gender of objects. But I pay attention to that of people,” suggesting that gender, as it relates to the French grammatical structure, is not something about which people think constantly, even if they, like these non-binary respondents, think about their own gender in the context of the language frequently. Some respondents explained that they do not think much about the meaning of these objects being gendered; as Mélissa explains, they “do not know how objects were originally gendered.” This suggests that, though their first language is gendered, they have never looked into the question of why. Rose echoes these beliefs and says that “I had never reflected on [the question of there being a difference between the gendering of people and objects in French], that’s a good question for an English speaker.” Gabriel further explained that the difference between gendering people and objects is “clearly different to me. I need to think each instant about this concerning people. For objects, it’s just a convention. After all, if I were a linguist, maybe I would look into gendering objects and what it signifies. But it’s too vast to do in life every day.” These respondents explain a sentiment that is common amongst the non-binary French-speaking people interviewed: just because the language has a grammatical gender does not mean that gender is constantly manifested in the language.

Objects are gendered in the language, but this is not mean that objects have a gender. To many, this is simply, as Mathis explains, a “given” in the language. This shows that gender in the language should not be seen as powerful in this instance, as it is only seen as the way people are taught to communicate but not the way people are taught to experience the world. Though existing literature shows that grammatical gender within a language can speed up the process of

binary gender development (Guiora et al. 1982), these findings do not refute any major studies, as few to no sociological studies look at how people perceive grammatical gender within the language outside of pronouns, forms of address, and adjective spellings (Hord 2016). When asked these questions, respondents suggested that grammatical gender within the language was of little to no importance.

Mathis explained that “nobody would be surprised if a chair was a [feminine] chair and not a [masculine] chair,” meaning that the gender of an object in the language is irrelevant, as one could switch the gender of the object and not have the meaning of the word change. If gender in the language actually had power in this situation, having the word “chair” be masculine and not feminine would make a difference to respondents. Some respondents explain that they prefer languages such as English where there is no distinction between objects by gender. However, even these respondents, such as David, say that in French the gendering of objects “does not bother [them].” This respondent knows another language where objects are not gendered and can make a comparison between the two languages. Even with this knowledge and experience, the gendering of objects in the language is not bothersome, as non-binary people who speak French understand that the grammar of the language does not necessarily have any actual power over the gender of people who speak the language.

However, respondents noted that, for people, being gendered in the language is a representation of larger structural systems. For example, Julia says that, “I believe that it’s necessary to differentiate between objects and that we need to have larger spectrum of vocabulary for people because people are more complex than an object.” Here, the respondent not only brings up the necessity for there to be more and more well known vocabulary to refer to

people, but they also bring up two points that are echoed by many respondents: the fact that people have identities and that having these identities has real-world consequences.

Being a member of a minority gender group means that people are influenced greatly by groups in power. When asked about the gendering of objects compared to the gendering of people in the French language, Théo explained that they do not care if an object is gendered because objects “do not have a conscious and do not suffer under the patriarchy.” This suggests that respondents realize how much language can limit their ability to understand their gender. However, an object does not question its gender, and the limitations of gender in French do not prevent the object from being its full self.

The same cannot be said for non-binary people who speak French, a group of people over whom patriarchal groups and systems, such as the Académie française, has power. Objects are steady and unchanging, meaning that if a speaker uses the grammatically incorrect gendered article to refer to an object, the object does not change and its identity as itself remains the same. One communicates the same message no matter what article is used to describe the object. For people, however, being misgendered is invalidating. For this reason, respondents explained that they try to use gender-neutral pronouns and descriptions when referring to people but do not try to change the gendered structure of the French language. Gavin explains that gender for people and for objects are “not the same because the issues are different (a table will not be hurt if I decided to gender it as masculine)” while another respondent details how the gendering of objects is, as Chloé explains, “without logic, it is by heart, and even if it completely exacerbated me, it is impossible to communicate otherwise in French.” These respondents see the gendering of objects as conventions of the language and necessary facets for communication without seeing it as manifestations of how gender influences humans in society.

Many, such as Mathis, see the gendering of the language as a convention of the language and say that the gendering of objects in the language is just “a small particularity of French which links to other European languages. It’s the same for animals, cats don’t have a concept of gender for example. It’s more complicated for humans because they can feel bad being misgendered.” The respondent here furthers the distinction between the groups over whom the French language has power. Though animals are living and are sentient beings, they are not influenced by power structures in the same way that humans are. For humans, language can have power over emotions whereas non-humans do not.

Joshua emphasized the difference between gender for people and gender for objects, saying that “gender is an entirely human concept,” meaning that, when discussing gender, the gendering of objects should not be discussed using the same language. They suggest that gender as the series of norms and gendering are very different concepts and should not be conflated. Only one respondent disagreed with this and said that they do not see a difference between the gendering of objects and the gendering of people in the French language. For every other respondent, they found that the gendering of objects in the French language was a part of the language and should not be completely changed. Many believe that changing the language would be too complicated and would destroy the part of the language that, to them, does not influence how they perceive their identity. Clémentine/Clémence explains that changing the language “would not be a good idea or it would be necessary to then destroy social gender relation so that there would no longer be any gender constructs.” They take a position that is common among respondents: that gendered language in and of itself is not powerful and that it serves solely as a representation of the larger force of the gender binary, something that is not unique to the French language.



Though French has a grammatical binary gender, most non-binary people who speak French do not believe that the gendered nature of the language itself has power over them. Rather, many argue that this facet of the language is a representation of the gender binary that exists in French society. However, many respondents are critical of the idea of suggesting that French being a binary language makes it harder for them to understand their own gender as even less-gendered languages still have manifestations of gender in the language. Further, even societies that have non- or not-as-gendered languages still have the gender binary. This suggests that the gendered nature of language does not have power over the understandings of non-binary people in their own language.

Dylan, when asked if growing up with a non-binary gender in a gendered language was hard, responded that they were unsure. They explained,

In languages that possess a grammatical gender, gender neutral words are rarely applied to humans (one doesn't use 'it' for people in English, 'es' in German, etc). In languages that do not have this grammatical gender, the gender of speakers is expressed in other manners, whether this is language or culture. All the codes of gender socialization participate in self-definition for this or that gender, and if society has a binary gender system, then all the codes will push people to define themselves in a binary way, even if the language is not part of these codes.

They suggest that, often, languages such as English are praised for having a more inclusive language, as gender-neutral pronouns exist within the existing structure of the language.

However, they point out that this comparison can be faulty, as there is still no gender-neutral singular pronoun in either of these languages that can be used to be applied to humans without using words that, in current usage, are only applicable to objects. This means that neither English nor German have fully surpassed French in terms of allowing for non-binary people to be represented in the language by their own non-gendered singular pronoun.

Further, this explanation presents the idea that there are so many other influences that shape gender perceptions aside from language. The majority of respondents in this study, for

example, expressed that they grew up in households where gender norms were reinforced by their parents, including forcing respondents to wear certain clothes and preventing them from playing certain sports. The explanation, then, suggests that, even if the language were not as gendered, the gender binary would still exist and would still push people towards being a binary gender. This idea is restated by Léane who explains that “languages that have introduced so-called ‘neutral’ pronouns are still not neutral languages, since gender has not disappeared.” This argues that, first, efforts to add neutral pronouns to a language to make it more inclusive fall short on this goal, as they offer a partial solution to the problem of lack of access to gender neutral language but do not solve the root problems of the gender binary being so deeply rooted in French society and the lack of access to information about gender and being non-binary in French.

Though having gender neutral pronouns is important so that people can properly express themselves and their experiences, this does remove the gender binary, the cause of the confusion and lack of clarity over their own gender. Lucie continues this logic in explaining what it is like to live as a non-binary person who speaks French. They say,

I do not know if it is more difficult to be understood as non-binary since gender is permanently imposed on us and can therefore seem more disturbing. On the contrary, I think that it is harder to live as non-binary in France because nobody wants to make an effort to create a neutral gender.

This response does not mention that the French language is the aspect of society that is imposed on them and that prevents them from achieving the type of gender freedom they want. Instead, they see the root problem as being gender and the lack of recognition that gender neutral identities receive. They argue that having language to use to describe their identity is important, however the only way to make real change in such a gendered society is by acknowledging that non-binary identities exist and are more than just a gender-neutral pronoun. Language is not the

end of the fight for non-binary rights, though many seem to believe that having gender neutral language is the final and most important step for gender recognition, whereas this respondent would argue that inclusive language should be seen as the first step.

Oscar, who has lived in countries with different languages has similar views, explains that the gender binary and social pressures to conform to the gender binary transcend the gendering of the language. When asked if they believe that growing up with a language that is so heavily gendered influenced their gender, they explain that they “did not notice a difference” and that, even when they lived in Romania and India, “even though the language is neutral it still genders people.” They continued to say, “it could be [the language that influences identity development] but I think it is more the binary mentality of society that is difficult, more than the usage of the language.” Here, the respondent shows that, even when they lived in places where they spoke languages that are not gendered, the gender binary still exists and is still persistent. The gender binary, they argue, is the more influential factor in shaping a person’s identity development than how gendered the language is.

This would suggest that poststructuralist theory is incorrect or limited in this case. Respondents explain that they are able to have meaningful experiences and express those to others, even without the necessary language to do so. Weedon (1997) argues that experience is meaningful only if it can be expressed through language and that language serves as one of the most important aspects of identity development in terms of limiting how much people can understand their own experiences. However, findings in this study suggest that people can and do have meaningful experiences regarding their gender despite not having the language foundation to express these experiences. Further, Weedon’s theories do not include the influence of society’s view on language, as this study found that the gendered nature of a particular society is

more important than the language itself, as society's norms greatly shape the language. While poststructuralist theory is correct in its assertion that language has power, it ignores the groups and systems that give language power and that both reinforce and are reinforced by language systems. For example, the French language being grammatically gendered does not influence non-binary peoples' gender identity development, but the gendered nature of French society does.

The French language, as it is heavily gendered, serves a partial representation of how gendered French society is. Léane sees this as a benefit for non-binary people, as they believe this pushes them to question their gender. They say that,

everything depends on the ways in which you determine the graduations of "gender" in a language... Taking French as the language of reference, I think that to the contrary having a language where the markers of gender are very present allows people to understand more quickly their uneasiness of being gendered as soon as they identify as non-binary.... though this eventually causes problems when we wish to no longer be gendered in this way.

This respondent suggests that, since the gender binary is so strong, seeing representations of it constantly and being pushed to ascribe to it in such a forceful manner actually helps people question their gender more quickly. Their reasoning is that, constantly feeling discomfort due to norms that are ascribed to them makes people more likely to question the source of the discomfort more quickly to get rid of the anxiety. French, as they suggest, has a high level of gendering in the language and strong pushes towards the gender binary in its society, meaning that the push of French society towards identifying as a binary gender will actually cause the inverse response of its goal, meaning more people will question their gender and will have a stronger pushback against the gender norms. Esteban echoes the same sentiment. Léane says, each sentence or close to each sentence refers to the gender a person was assigned at birth. But, on the other hand to be non-binary is a feeling. Even if one cannot express the neutral, that does

not mean that it is not there. Maybe a very gendered language can be used to provoke obvious disgust in those who feel neither male nor female.

This statement calls to light both situations where language has power and where it does not. As Esteban points out, French is a highly gendered language, and France is a highly gendered environment. People who are non-binary who speak French often have feelings of their neutral gender despite the gender limitations imposed by the grammar of and the people in charge of the French language. However, a lack of language often prevents people from being able to fully discover their gender, even though their feelings are real and valid. The language that they use until they learn about their own gender is a representation of all of the gender norms that exist in France which attempt to push people towards one end of the gender spectrum or the other. As Esteban and other respondents argue, though, the heavy influence of gender norms on the language makes non-binary people feel less and less as though they fit in the gender category which they were assigned at birth. Because of this, when people learn the word “non-binary,” they have such a strong reaction to the word, as it is the culmination of years of constant discomfort in their own language and society. Learning the word additionally comes with learning that a community of people with a similar gender exists, meaning that the non-binary person is no longer alone. However, inclusive language that many non-binary people choose to use is not well known and is not accepted by the larger French society, meaning that these smaller spaces are the only ones where they feel comfortable. Further, pushes for neutral language, are the necessary next step to create a more inclusive language, however without their gender recognized, non-binary people often feel as though language, while important, only deals with the short-term problem instead of fixing the larger issue of the gender binary.

## **CONCLUSION**

When I was 19, I worked at a summer camp in western Massachusetts. One day, while walking to our “noonish meeting,” a camper came up to me and asked me what I studied at university. I explained that I study French and Sociology, but that I was most interested in studying gender and sexuality. Another member of staff who is non-binary walked by, and my camper asked me what pronouns non-binary people use when speaking French. I said that I did not know and got distracted by another camper who was trying to climb on the small awning we had next to the ping pong table (campers are not allowed up there). I quickly forgot about the question until taking Qualitative Research Methods of Sociology a year and a half later in the spring of 2017.

That semester, I had just returned from studying abroad and working in Geneva, Switzerland (a French-speaking city) and had an internship at the French Consulate in Boston. I was taking two French classes and felt as though I was drowning in the language. During the second week of classes, the professor of Qualitative Research Methods of Sociology, Professor Marrow, told our class to pick a topic for our semester-long research project. I met with her during office-hours the following day to narrow down my topic. I wanted to explore the emotional labor that drone-fighter pilots experience. Professor Marrow told me that the project would be too hard, as I knew zero drone-fighter pilots and did not have IRB approval. She asked if I had any other paradoxes that I had always wanted to explore (and that could be answered using semi-structured interviews). For the first time in a year-and-a-half, the question my camper had posed came to mind. I told Professor Marrow that I had wondered about pronoun usage of non-binary people who speak French. She said “great, go for it.”

I started my exploration of the topic and, by the end of April, found myself with a 25 page paper with which I was dissatisfied. I felt as though I had not fully answered my question of how a person could develop a neutral gender identity in such a gendered language. At the end of the semester, Professor Marrow suggested that I write a thesis to answer all of my lingering questions. With the help of Professor Dhingra of the sociology department, I narrowed down my question to “how do people with non-binary gender identities who speak French develop and understand their gender and what is the power of language in this situation?”

In order to explore this topic, I first looked at literature regarding the importance of language and speech communities in a person’s education. Current poststructuralist theory regarding language suggests that language is the tool through which people are able to express their experiences to others (Weedon 1997). One is not required to have the language in order to have experiences and feelings, however a lack of language prevents others from being able to understand and validate these feelings (Haines 2017). This lack of validation becomes important because, if a person cannot confirm that others have had these shared experiences, they feel alone, which is worsened by a lack of language which renders them unable to rid themselves of their loneliness. This would suggest, then, that vocabulary and an understanding of language, at least to an extent, is important in a person’s ability to be an active member of a group in society.

Gaining this understanding of a language, however, is not limited to learning the vocabulary and grammatical structure within the language. An acquisition of language comes with the acquisition of the social norms and expected practices within the group of people who speak the language, or the speech-community (Gumperz 1964). The vocabulary that exists or the structure of the language reflects the norms of the society that speaks the language, such as how

some languages have more words for certain concepts than others (Haines 2017). Some theorists argue, then, that language shapes the ways in which people process different concepts.

Weedon (1997), a poststructuralist theorist, argues that language dictates the type of experiences that a person is allowed to have validated by others. This means that, if a language does not have terminology for certain experiences, the society in which the language is spoken inherently suggests that these experiences are not ones that should be acknowledged. For example, French has a binary grammatical structure and lacks certain vocabulary that shapes the way people can express their experiences.

Much like other Romance languages, French has a binary grammatical structure and has heavy amounts of grammatical gender within the language. However, one unique facet of the French language comes with how the language is monitored by the Académie française, a group of prolific French writers and thinkers who are appointed by the French government and voted on by current members to maintain the language. This organization and its members (called *les immortels* or “the immortals”) see the language as, its perfect form, homogeneous and unchanging (Fleishman 1997). This creates two divides: the first is a divide between France and the rest of the changing (and therefore imperfect) world. The second is a divide between people within the French language who speak “properly” and those who do not. Because of this need for perfection and the need for superiority of the language both on the world stage and within Francophone communities, any attempts to change the language are received poorly (Fleishman 1997). If language reflects the ideologies within a society, then, a lack of willingness to change language reflects a lack of willingness to change what is the “norm” in society.

For example, one such change that some activist groups attempt to make comes in the form of “inclusive language,” or language that reflects genders that are not binary. Many



activists suggest that this type of language is important, as the binary structure of the language does not have linguistic room for people with non-binary genders to express their identities (Hord 2016). This becomes of further importance when understanding the importance of gender identity development.

A person's social identity is the knowledge that they belong in a particular group (Stets and Burke 2000). This definition is so important because it brings to light the importance of the community aspect of a person's identity. A person, in developing an identity, identifies with and practices the norms within a set community. Cooley (1902) explains this aspect of identity development in his work, explaining that a person's beliefs and actions are based on how they believe they are supposed to act in a certain situation based on what they see as the norms within a community. Otherwise said, a person sees themselves how they believe society sees them and internalizes the norms of a society. When trying to decide how to act, a person takes these social norms (or their interpretation of the social norms) and acts according to what they believe the norms dictate. The same can be said for gender development, as cisgender and binary transgender people use gender norms for men and women as the basis for much of their actions in daily life. However, this is further complicated when looking at non-binary gender identities.

There is little sociological research on people with non-binary gender identities, or those that are not fully "masculine" or "feminine" on the gender binary. There is, however, more research on identity development among binary transgender groups. Existing research (Katz-Wise et al. 2017) (Testa et al. 2013) suggests that, from a young age, most people with transgender identities feel a sense that the gender they were assigned at birth is incorrect. These feelings often cause anxiety, as there is little representation of trans people in the media and as trans narratives are not as easily available as those of cis people. However, once trans people

hear the narratives of other trans people and learn the term “transgender” (Levitt and Ippolito 2014), they learn that they are members of a community of people who have feelings and experiences similar to theirs, meaning that they are not alone in their gender.

In this research, then, I tried to understand how the binary nature of the French language influences non-binary identity development to explore the power of language and to understand how people create gender-neutral identities in gendered languages.

To explore this topic, I conducted structured interviews of non-binary French-speaking people. These respondents were found via Facebook on a page called “NB Francophone : Non-Binaire, Queer, Androgyne, Fluide, Agenre, Xénoggenre...” whose purpose, according to their page, is to provide support for non-binary people who speak French. Though there are several thousand members of the Facebook page as of April 2018, it is unclear how representative this group is of the non-binary community in France and other Francophone regions. France does not have national statistics regarding gender identity of transgender and non-binary people, and existing smaller-scale surveys do not appear to be representative of the population-at-large (Gabriel 2018). Further, I do not have access to statistics regarding the demographics of members of this Facebook group. However, using this group provides the best opportunity to find a representative sample of non-binary people who speak French, as it appears to be the largest community of its kind.

Respondents for this survey seem to match the demographics of people I see most frequently interacting with the Facebook page, as most respondents identify as non-binary and live in France. I conducted two interviews with different sets of questions. Only two respondents participated in both sets of interviews. Questions in the first set of interviews asked about how family, friends, and school and the gendered nature of French grammar influenced respondents’

gender development. The second set of interviews focused more on how learning terminology regarding gender influenced gender development and how respondents' felt as though the French language shaped their conceptions of their gender. At the end of each interview, I asked the respondents if there was anything that I did not ask but they would like to tell me.

In this research, I also analyzed statements made by the Académie française, as they are the formal structure in power that has control over the French language. Further, the Académie française has directly addressed their negative feelings towards inclusive language, meaning that their input regarding gender within the language is relevant in the context of this study.

My research suggests a few key findings. The first is that language is important when it comes to people being able to access terminology to express their gender. Respondents explain that, growing up, they felt as though they were non-binary but were never able to find and use language to express their feelings. Because of this, they were unable to communicate these experiences to others and were unable to find clarity in the feelings that they had. However, when they learned the term “non-binary” (or a similar term such as “queer”), they had a moment of clarity where they were able to recognize their own feelings for the first time. This moment also came with the understanding that there exists a broader community of people with the same gender as them.

This community, for many respondents, only comes in the form of the online Facebook group NB Francophones. Despite this community being online and not in the “real world,” for many respondents, this community came as the first (and for some only) space where their gender, pronouns, and experiences are validated and are shared by others.

Having this community of people allows, as Mead (1934) and Cooley (1902) explain, non-binary French-speaking people to develop their identity further, as they have a set of norms

of practice to which they can turn. However, without this community, people express that they feel, as respondent Dylan explains, “isolated because I could not be named.” One respondent explains that they do not like how isolated communities of non-binary Francophone people are, as these communities are so private that they create a divide between “safe” (where pronouns and gender are respected such as the NB Francophone Facebook group) and “unsafe” (where pronouns and gender are not respected such as real-life interactions with cisgender friends and family) spaces. Other respondents, however, do not comment on this divide and express joy that they finally have a space where they feel as though they could fully express their gender.

After learning the terminology regarding their new gender and identifying as this new gender, no respondents changed the ways they expressed their gender outside of pronoun usage. This matches current research on non-binary gender identities which explains that non-binary people are in a unique position where there is no set of norms from which they are expected to draw in order to perform their gender (Keener 2015). Because of this, one of the biggest shifts comes in the form of using different pronouns or a different name. Many respondents, though, explain that they did not change pronouns or gender expression because of the time and energy that comes with explaining their gender to family, friends, and strangers. Others cite fear as a reason that their gender presentation did not change. Some choose to explain their gender, and many use visual images in order to explain how a person can be neither man nor woman. One commonality among most respondents is the hope that there will be changes within the French language to be more inclusive of gender-neutral identities.

Most respondents express a desire to have inclusive language in French, or to have gender-neutral adjective and verb forms legally recognized alongside gender-neutral pronouns. Respondents do not see these changes as extreme, as they do not disrupt the binary grammatical

gender that exists throughout most of the language (only one respondent calls for a change towards using gender-neutral articles to describe objects). Respondents explain that they would like to see their gender recognized in the language, or that they would like the language to make room for their gender. Without this recognition, though, participants unanimously agree that they do not feel supported by the current grammatical structure and existing vocabulary within the French language. The pushbacks against these changes that come from the Académie française further dishearten respondents, as the organization gave a very clear and definite explanation for why they will not support inclusive language within the near future. This declaration comes as a representation of the extreme binary structure of both the French language and French society. As binary as the French language is, however, respondents do not see the grammatical gender within the language as important.

Respondents agreed that the gender of objects in the French language is not important to them. Most explained that the gendering of objects in French is not a manifestation of gender as it refers to humans (as a table will not care if it is misgendered) and that these grammatical rules are simply part of the language and should not be given more thought. However, respondents made a clear distinction for the gendering of people in the language. Gender, they explain, is a structure that has real-world implications on peoples' lives. Being misgendered is having a part of one's identity invalidated. Despite language having the power to invalidate an identity, respondents do not see the binary grammatical structure of the French language having a negative influence on their ability to understand their gender. They argue that the language is a representation of the other binary aspects of French society, such as gender norms that come from parents and peers, and that the binary nature of the language should not be given special importance in this context. This deviates from poststructuralist arguments, as respondents take

into account other important factors of identity development and acknowledge the ways in which language is limited in some cases. Though language can prevent people from accessing terminology to understand their gender, this structure is not all-powerful and should not be treated as such.

This study contains three major limitations. The first limitation comes from the lack of literature on the influence of language on gender development. Though sociolinguistics often study the influence of gender on language, there is little to no published and accepted research on the influence of language on gender development. Without this foundational literature, fully studying the subject of the influence of a binary language on non-binary populations becomes limited, as it is impossible to know if these findings match that which scholars have already found. For example, future projects could compare the identity development of Francophone non-binary people to that of Anglophone non-binary people. With gender identity as the independent variable, having languages with different amounts of grammatical gender within the language as the dependent variables could be helpful in exploring this question.

Second, the lack of sociological literature on gender identity development (and specifically transgender and non-binary identity development) from a symbolic interactionist perspective made the task of understanding how non-binary people came to their gender difficult. With this literature as a basis, future projects could compare the identity development of non-binary people to cisgender people within the same community.

Finally, a limitation in this study comes from the lack of reliable and available data on non-binary populations in France and other Francophone nations. Without this knowledge, I am unable to say whether my sample of respondents accurately represents the Francophone non-binary community. This may prove to be the most difficult of the limitations to solve, as the

French government would have to acknowledge the existence of French people with non-binary identities in order to learn information about them. Aside from providing more information to researchers, learning more about the Francophone non-binary community through nation-wide surveys would provide a concrete acknowledgement that, not only are there non-binary communities in the Francophone world, but that this community is large and important enough to warrant studying. These potential surveys on Francophone non-binary people could validate the existence of non-binary people and spread knowledge of the existence of non-binary gender identities. This could lead to more widespread knowledge of vocabulary regarding gender and non-binary gender identities, allowing more people to recognize their gender in the language for the first time.

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## **APPENDIX**

## **INTERVIEW #1**

### **“LA NON BINARITÉ”**

**1 PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY:** You are invited to take part in a qualitative sociological study for a senior honors thesis. Specifically, this study looks the ways in which people with non-binary gender identities who speak French understand their gender. The purpose of this study is to understand the paradox of gender neutrality in a heavily gendered language.

**WHAT YOU WILL DO IN THIS STUDY:** You must be 18 years old or older in order to participate in this study. If you agree to be a part of this study, you will read this consent form and you will click "Yes" to consent to taking this survey. You will be asked questions pertaining to your gender identity in relation to the French language. Further, you will be asked questions about any other sources for support or information to which you may have turned. If there are further questions that need to be asked, I will send you another set of questions via Qualtrics survey.

**DURATION:** This interview will be held at your convenience. I anticipate that it will take you about an hour to fill out the Qualtrics survey.

**RISKS AND DISCOMFORT:** There are no physical risks associated with participating in this study. There are no known economic risks involved with participating in this interview. Every effort will be made to protect the confidentiality of your information. Some of the questions we will ask you as part of this study may make you uncomfortable because we are addressing sensitive topics, such as your gender identity. You can fill out the form at your own pace. You do not have to finish filling out the form if you do not wish to do so. You can opt to not participate at all without any penalty or loss of benefits.

**BENEFITS:** There are no direct benefits to you for participation in this survey.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** The results of this study will result in one senior honors thesis which will be stored permanently in the Tufts University archives. Efforts will be made to make your identity confidential, including referring to you under another name, changing some personal information about you, and keeping all information gathered in encrypted files.

**COMPENSATION:** You will receive no compensation for participation in this study.

**REQUEST FOR MORE INFORMATION:** You may ask more questions about the study at any time. Please e-mail the principal investigator at [carolyn.margulies@tufts.edu](mailto:carolyn.margulies@tufts.edu) or telephone (904) 710-9182 with any questions or concerns about the study. In addition, you may contact Professor Pawan Dhingra at the Tufts University Sociology department at (617)627-3561. You also may contact Lara Sloboda, SBER IRB Operations Manager, or email [sber@tufts.edu](mailto:sber@tufts.edu) for further information regarding human subject research.

**WITHDRAWAL OF PARTICIPATION:** Your participation is voluntary. Should you decide at any time during the interview that you no longer wish to participate, you may withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation without penalty or loss of benefits.

**SIGNATURE:** I confirm that I understand the purpose of the study and the study procedures. I understand that I may ask questions at any time and can withdraw my participation without

prejudice. I have read this consent form. My clicking "Yes" below indicates my willingness to participate in this study.

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

3 Que nom utilisez-vous ?

4 Où êtes-vous né.e ?

5 Quel âge avez-vous ?

6 Où habitez-vous ?

7 Quel est votre travail ?

8 Quel est votre genre ?

9 Quels pronoms utilisez-vous ?

10 Quand vous utilisez des pronoms pour vous décrire, quelle forme du mot utilisez-vous (gentil vs gentille) ?

11 Quel est le genre qui vous a été assigné à la naissance ?

12 De tous les façons que vos parents ont fait des normes de genre pour vous, quelles étaient les plus significatif ? Est-ce que c'est des vêtements qu'ils vous ont acheté, des activités, des expectations pour les rendez-vous, des surnoms ?

13 À quel âge avez-vous commencé à questionner le genre que vous a été assigné à la naissance ?

14 Quels sources avez-vous utilisé pour mieux comprendre votre identité ? Par exemple, avez-vous trouvé d'information sur l'internet ? Avez-vous parlé aux autres gens transgenres ?

15 À cette fois, saviez-vous qu'il y a des gens transgenres ? Où avez-vous appris ce mot, « transgenre, » et qu'est-ce que ce mot a signifié pour vous ? Aviez-vous fait la connaissance de quelqu'un qui est transgenre avant ?

16 Quels gens étaient les plus importants de votre compréhension de votre identité non-binaire ? Est-ce que c'étaient vos parents, des ami.e.s, d'autres gens trans, l'internet, etc. ?

Q31 Qu'avez-vous pensé d'être non-binaire quand vous avez appris de ce genre pour la première fois ? Depuis lors, la signification de cette identité a-t-elle changé pour vous ? Comment ?

17 De votre vie, qui avez-vous parlé de votre identité non-binaire ? Comment ont-ils réagit ? Y a-t-il des gens à qui vous n'avez pas parlé de votre identité non-binaire ? Pourquoi ?

18 Quand vous étiez au lycée, est-ce qu'il y avait des discussions du sujet des genres des mots dans la langue française ? Si oui, comment est-ce que les gens l'ont parlé ?

19 Quand vous étiez au lycée, essayiez-vous de performer un autre genre ? Comment ? Comment est-ce que vos camarades ont réagit ?

20 Comment vous sentez-vous d'utiliser des mots genré pour faire référence aux êtres humains à la comparaison d'utiliser des mots genré pour faire référence aux objets ? Est-ce que cela est ennuyeux pour les humains mais pas pour les objets ? Est-ce c'est la même ?

21 Qu'est-ce que votre genre signifie pour vous ?

Q29 Qu'est-ce que le mot "genre" signifie pour vous ?

Q30 Qu'est-ce que les mots "non-binaire" signifie pour vous ?

22 Comment présentez-vous votre identité non-binaire aux étrangers ? Aux ami.e.s ? À votre famille ?

23 Comment vous-sentez-vous de votre genre dans le contexte de la langue française ? Sentez-vous que cette langue supporte votre genre ?

24 Comment vous-sentez-vous de votre genre dans le contexte de la société française ? Sentez-vous que cette société supporte votre genre ?

Voyez-vous des efforts de changer la langue pour mieux inclure les genres non-binaires ? Si oui, pouvez-vous élaborer ?

Êtes-vous dans des communautés où vous vous sentez plus confortable ou plus accepté.e dans votre identité de genre ? Si ou, pouvez-vous élaborer ?

27 Y a-t-il quelque chose d'autre que vous voulez me dire dont je n'ai pas demandé ?

## **INTERVIEW #2**

### **“LA NON BINARITÉ (DEUXIÈME PARTIE)”**

**PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY:** You are invited to take part in a qualitative sociological study for a senior honors thesis. Specifically, this study looks the ways in which people with non-binary gender identities who speak French understand their gender. The purpose of this study is to understand the paradox of gender neutrality in a heavily gendered language.

**WHAT YOU WILL DO IN THIS STUDY:** You must be 18 years old or older in order to participate in this study. If you agree to be a part of this study, you will read this consent form and you will click "Yes" to consent to taking this survey. You will be asked questions pertaining to your gender identity in relation to the French language. Further, you will be asked questions about any other sources for support or information to which you may have turned. If there are further questions that need to be asked, I will send you another set of questions via Qualtrics survey.

**DURATION:** This interview will be held at your convenience. I anticipate that it will take you about an hour to fill out the Qualtrics survey.

**RISKS AND DISCOMFORT:** There are no physical risks associated with participating in this study. There are no known economic risks involved with participating in this interview. Every effort will be made to protect the confidentiality of your information. Some of the questions we will ask you as part of this study may make you uncomfortable because we are addressing sensitive topics, such as your gender identity. You can fill out the form at your own pace. You do not have to finish filling out the form if you do not wish to do so. You can opt to not participate at all without any penalty or loss of benefits.

**BENEFITS:** There are no direct benefits to you for participation in this survey.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** The results of this study will result in one senior honors thesis which will be stored permanently in the Tufts University archives. Efforts will be made to make your identity confidential, including referring to you under another name, changing some personal information about you, and keeping all information gathered in encrypted files.

**COMPENSATION:** You will receive no compensation for participation in this study.

**REQUEST FOR MORE INFORMATION:** You may ask more questions about the study at any time. Please e-mail the principal investigator at [carolyn.margulies@tufts.edu](mailto:carolyn.margulies@tufts.edu) or telephone (904) 710-9182 with any questions or concerns about the study. In addition, you may contact Professor Pawan Dhingra at the Tufts University Sociology department at (617)627-3561. You also may contact Lara Sloboda, SBER IRB Operations Manager, or email [sber@tufts.edu](mailto:sber@tufts.edu) for further information regarding human subject research.

**WITHDRAWAL OF PARTICIPATION:** Your participation is voluntary. Should you decide at any time during the interview that you no longer wish to participate, you may withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation without penalty or loss of benefits.

**SIGNATURE:** I confirm that I understand the purpose of the study and the study procedures. I understand that I may ask questions at any time and can withdraw my participation without

prejudice. I have read this consent form. My clicking "Yes" below indicates my willingness to participate in this study.

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

2 Que nom utilisez-vous ?

3 Avez-vous répondu au premier sondage que j'ai posté sur cette page? Si oui, il ne faut pas répondre aux questions 4 à 6

4 Où habitez-vous ?

5 Quel est votre travail ?

6 Quel est votre genre ?

7 Quand vous grandissiez, quelle a été la force du binaire de genre à l'école, la langue française, vos amis, etc. ? Pensez-vous que vos parents ont eu plus d'influence que ces autres groupes ? Pourquoi ?

8 Qu'avez-vous ressenti à propos de votre genre avant d'avoir appris les mots « non-binaire » ? Pourquoi ?

9 Comment vous êtes-vous senti lorsque vous avez appris les mots « non-binaire » pour la première fois ? Pourquoi ces mots ont-ils tellement d'influence ?

10 Combien de temps s'est écoulé entre le moment où vous avez appris les mots « non-binaire » et où vous vous êtes senti comme si ces mots étaient ceux que vous utiliseriez pour vous décrire ? Pourquoi cela a-t-il pris autant de temps ?

11 Parlez-vous d'autres langues que le français ? Lesquels ? Vous sentez-vous aussi à l'aise avec votre genre dans cette langue qu'en français ? Pourquoi ?

12 Avez-vous déjà visité ou habité dans un pays qui parle une langue neutre? Qu'avez-vous ressenti à propos de votre genre dans le contexte de ce pays?

13 Lorsque vous en appreniez davantage sur les identités de genre non binaires, quelle était la langue des sources que vous avez utilisées?

14 Grandir dans une langue très genrée semble rendre plus difficile de se comprendre comme non-binaire. Est-ce vrai? Si oui, pourquoi? Sinon, pourquoi pas ?

15 Avez-vous l'impression que les efforts pour changer la langue sont axés sur l'aide aux personnes ayant des identités non binaires?

16 Voulez-vous que la langue change pour faire de la place pour la neutralité de genre? Comment aimeriez-vous que cela change (pronoms non genrés, ne pas engendrer d'objets, rendre tout genre neutre, etc.) ?

17 Y a-t-il quelque chose d'autre que vous voulez me dire dont je n'ai pas demandé ?