Degree in English Studies

Non-Binary Gender Identities and Language Use

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Abstract

The sociolinguistic research that has examined the relation between language and gender has experienced a significant change in the past decades. As a matter of fact, a new approach to feminist theory that rejected the fixity of gender binary and encouraged the diversity of gender identities emerged in the 1990s. Together with this new feminist approach, queer theory, with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler being among the main exponents, also highlighted the notion of gender as a social construct and the importance of the speech acts to construct identities. Thus, the study of gender within the field of sociolinguistics is now more concerned with the diversity of gender identities and rejects oppressive constructions around gender and sexuality. In section 2 of this paper, those theoretical aspects are discussed, along with the recent linguistic contributions promoted by individuals with non-binary or non-normative gender identities. This paper aims to examine the power and the effectiveness of language not only to support but also to construct identities. In the third section, I present the contrasting experiences of individuals with non-normative gender identities and the gender-neutral choices promoted by them to reveal and disclose those identities. Moreover, this section will show the subversive role of language through the redefinition of historically derogatory words such as queer. The findings of research on language and gender have emphasised the importance of the evolution of language in order to create a gender inclusive world. Thus, throughout the creation of new linguistic options, non-binary gender identities can be taken into consideration and understood by society in general. At the same time, the creation of new words and gender-neutral options has promoted a broad debate between people, especially among linguists and grammarians, who underestimate the necessity of new gender-neutral options. Finally, some future challenges in relation with the possible identities an individual can perform are also identified.

Keywords: Non-binary, gender identities, gender-neutral, social construct, linguistic options.
1. Introduction

The goal of the present study is to acknowledge the power of language to create and support non-binary gender identities and practices. As a matter of fact, the study of non-binary gender identities has become an important aspect of sociolinguistic research. Moreover, it has been recently argued that as non-normative identities gain visibility within the society, language changes and creates new gender inclusive options. Some researchers, such as the socio-cultural linguist Lal Zimman (2014), would argue that the normative framework created around gender and sexuality can be challenged by the use of language.

Before the postmodernist\(^1\) turn in the 1990s, researchers, such as Robin Lakoff (1973), were more focused on the differences between women’s and men’s use of language according to the socialization that occurred in the context of a sexist and patriarchal society. Moreover, this approach did not take into consideration other possible gender identities or other variables, such as class or race. Nonetheless, more significant attention has now begun to be given to a wide variety of gender identities and the effect those identities have on language. But, although there has been an increasing number of studies dedicated to this field in the last decades, researchers interested in the field of language and gender continue to promote and establish well-differentiated dichotomies—such as men and women—in their studies. It would seem, therefore, that further research is needed in order to dispel the idea that gender is a fixed dichotomy.

The first aim of this study is to dismantle the oppressive constructions around the concepts of gender and sexuality—the fixity of gender binary and the normative conception of heterosexuality—and then, by taking the analysis of these considerations, to present the contrasting realities of non-normative identities and their linguistic choices. Therefore, this paper approaches these topics and makes the following fundamental enquiry: To what extent does language have the power to create identities?

The discussion that follows will focus, first, on the analysis of gender as a non-fixed category, followed by an explanation of the correlation between gender and sex. The second section of this paper addresses the issue of gender as an activity that can be performed—following Judith Butler’s theory of gender as a performance. The third

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\(^1\)Term used by Deborah Cameron in her work “Language, gender, and sexuality: Current issues and new directions” to refer to the feminist approach that defined gender as a social construction rather than a biological circumstance.
section addresses the issue of the hetero-normative conception of sexuality and, at the same time, it contrasts the general understanding of sexuality and its relation with language and other non-normative experiences, such as the personal research of a lesbian teacher. Then, some of the most common non-normative identities will be noted and defined in order to comprehend the linguistic preferences of each individual. Finally, this paper will provide a number of gender-neutral pronouns and words to demonstrate the validity of gender inclusive options and the subversive power of language.

2. Socio-historical context: The notion of gender

The notion of gender has suffered a number of modifications in the last decades. Since the early 1990s, there has been a significant change in the notion of gender and its limitations. As a matter of fact, Deborah Cameron (2005) explains that the feminist linguists of the 1970s focused their research on a more essentialist\(^2\) analysis of gender, that is, these researchers interpreted gender as a binary opposition between male and female and they aimed to examine the differences between their use of language. Thus, the biggest concern for the linguists of the early 1970s was to identify the differences in language use between men and women as a result of the unconscious knowledge they had acquired in a patriarchal society (Cameron, 2005). Additionally, this approach did not take into consideration other possible identities—gender identities—and practices, nor other variables such as class or race.

From the first half of the 1990s, some other researchers questioned the social and fixed construction created around the concept of gender, which came to be referred to as the postmodernist approach (Cameron, 2005). In addition, they wanted to avoid the presupposition that the differences in the use of language could be determined by a socially established female-male classification (Mills, 2003). This opinion also existed before the postmodernist turn, although, as Cameron (2005) explains, it became increasingly popular in the 1990s. The postmodernist approach is concerned with the notion of gender diversity, in contrast with the idea of gender as a fixed dichotomy.

As was pointed out before, the traditional perspective did not take into account other sociolinguistic variables such as race or class. The majority of the previous generalisations—in relation with men's and women's differences—described the

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\(^2\) Gender essentialism refers to the idea that there are pre-existing biological differences between men and women.
'reality' of white, middle class individuals. For not taking the context into account, those generalisations could not be extrapolated to more specific circumstances (Mills, 2003). Litosseliti and Sunderland (2002) claim that much of the early research on gender and language not only minimized the importance of context variables, but also assumed that "the way women and men spoke was shaped by whether they were female or male ... with little or no room for human agency" (p. 4). For that reason, these generalisations have been considered erroneous. As a result, the presumption that all men and all women act similarly due to their particular position in society has been recently discarded. Since the postmodernist turn, research on language and gender has shown that men's and women's behaviours —linguistic behaviours— depend on the context and other variables such as race, class or education. Thus, the postmodernist approach stimulated a new way of theorising gender and, therefore, its relation with language. The principal purpose was to move beyond binary thinking in order to produce more flexible and versatile statements about the use of language of some men and women in particular contexts (Mills, 2003).

2.1. Sex and gender
In addition to the notion of gender, the notion of sex has also been challenged in the past decades. The terms sex and gender have traditionally been understood by early feminist scholars as opposites, sex being perceived as a biological and permanent condition on the one hand and gender as a social construction on the other (Wong, 2017). The postmodernist approach, however, supports the idea that sex is in fact a social construct. Lal Zimman (2014), for instance, has argued the following:

As long as sex and gender are conceptualized as opposites with sex playing the part of the body's pre-cultural state, biological essentialism retains the ability to enforce and naturalize a limited gender binary. It is through the recognition that sex is not opposed to gender, but rather a part of it that we can launch a thorough investigation of the gender binary itself (...) As with gender, some of the best evidence that sex is socially constructed comes from the diversity that can be found across cultures in how the relationship between gender and the body is understood. Anthropological research by Gilbert Herdt (1990, 1993), for instance, illustrates the ways that sexually ambiguous bodies may be viewed as
male in some cultural contexts, female in others, and as belonging to a third gender category in yet others. (pp.14-16)

Hence, defining sex purely as a pre-existing biological condition of the body encourages a dichotomous view of gender since individuals might be labeled according to their biological traits. As a matter of fact, one of the most striking aspects of this problem is that gender continues to be constantly reduced and polarised. Consequently, the essentialist view of gender is emphasised and, at the same time, the image of a continuum, that is, a continuous line between opposite poles in which individuals are situated according to their biological traits. In addition to this, Wayne (2005) states that "our so called sexual anatomy expresses no more about our identity than does our knee or elbow, but once public, our anatomy enters into a sex/gender regime that aligns sex dichotomy with essential identity" (p. 89). For that reason, this paper supports a broader image that is illustrated by an unrestricted and wide spectrum in which individuals are located, rather than on a continuous line.

2.2. Performing gender identity

In contrast with the essentialist theories, in the 1990s, many feminist linguists adopted a new focus on gender and began to consider gender as an activity that is ‘performed’ (Mills, 2003). Many of them were influenced by the idea of performativity developed by Judith Butler (1990) in her work Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity, in which she argues that "gender is itself a kind of becoming or activity, and that gender ought not to be conceived as a noun ... but rather as an incessant and repeated action of some sort" (p. 143). Thus, gender is not a possession or an attribute that can be achieved, but rather a process in which individuals consciously perform their identities (Mills, 2003). The concept of performativity is defined by Butler (1990) in Gender Trouble not as a “singular act, but [as] a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (p. xiv-xv). In brief, Butler (1990) states the following:

[... ] gender proves to be performative —that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed. There is no gender identity

According to Judith Butler, gender is something performed and it is executed by means of the speaking style or the way of dressing, for instance. This is known as the performativity theory.
behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by
the very “expressions” that are said to be its results. (p. 33)

Thus, the realization of gender or gender identities occurs only due to the repeated
actions personally selected by each individual, and not due to a pre-existing biological
condition. This process has also been described by Litosseliti and Sunderland (2002) as
language shaping gender, who aimed to highlight the effect of language on the
representation of gender. Taking this into account, gender is understood as a complex
and irregular category and language is seen as a means to construct it. Litosseliti and
Sunderland (2002) also mention the figure of the 'drag queen' and the 'sex worker' as
two potential exponents in demonstrating the notion of performativity in gender. These
figures represent an apparent exaggeration in the portrayal of femininity, both built
through the use of a particular language —a socially constructed feminine style. These
examples briefly illustrate the changing-state of gender and the function of language to
construct it in a particular performance. Thus, a drag queen —term that applies to a
male who does a performance using traditional feminine behaviours— can create a
feminine identity through the use of language. Additionally, Judith Butler (1990) points
out that these examples are not unconventional or occasional performances and that "it
would be a mistake to take it as the paradigm of subversive action or, indeed, as a model
for political agency" (p. xxii), but rather as a common activity that, in this case,
challenges the traditional practices or behaviours that we have internalized. As a matter
of fact, Judith Butler (1990) also highlights the internalized knowledge that individuals
may have adopted to explain our general perception of gender performances. She
addresses the concepts of reality and naturalized knowledge by suggesting that if a
person sees a man dressed as a woman or 'acting like a woman', then that person would
think that he is a man instead of a woman. Thus, Butler (1990) claims the following:

The gender that is introduced through the simile lacks 'reality', and is taken to
constitute an illusory appearance. In such perceptions in which an ostensible
reality is coupled with an unreality, we think we know what the reality is, and
take the secondary appearance of gender to be mere artifice (...) This is
'naturalized knowledge', even though it is based on a series of cultural
inferences, some of which are highly erroneous. (p. xxii)

In addition to this, Deborah Cameron (1998) emphasises the importance of
performativity in connection with 'gendered speech'. In fact, speech functions as an
instrument which is in constant use in order to construct our identity. In this way, the
discussion is now focused on the linguistic choices of individuals to perform gender.
Furthermore, this approach also acknowledges that individuals are conscious performers
regardless of the stereotypical behaviours they might have adopted within a particular
community (Cameron, 1998).

2.2.1. Performing masculinity and femininity
In relation with the notion of performativity, the linguistic resources used by individuals
in particular contexts might be highly influenced by the stereotypical conventions of a
specific community. Stereotypes are statements that refer to specific characteristics
shared by a group of people and then are established as general principles. In this case,
those generalisations have traditionally been understood as fixed assumptions related to
the behaviour of men and women (Mills, 2003). In other words, those general
constructions, associated with a more essentialist view, have traditionally been used in
order to reach a conclusion about the linguistic behaviours of men and women.

However, the postmodernist approach draws attention to a more diverse view of
gender which complicates the possibility of creating general assumptions. This
approach, as this paper has already examined, is focused on the analysis of particular
behaviours of individuals in very specific situations. Furthermore, it acknowledges other
context variables such as race and class. It is true, however, that this view also allows
for variation between the categories male and female, as well as masculinity and
femininity.

On the one hand, the notion of femininity has commonly been associated with
private spaces instead of public ones and, thus, with care and subservience (Mills,
2003). Linguistically speaking, these factors' influence affects the way in which
femininity is portrayed in society. For example, some characteristics such as the
politeness or the fineness of women’s speech have traditionally been analyzed in more
essentialist studies (Coates, 2015), since stereotypes are usually treated as universal
constructions. However, the majority of them are generally created within a particular
community at a particular moment in time. As a matter of fact, the notion of femininity
has changed significantly in the last decades, as has the way in which femininity is
performed (Mills, 2003).

On the other hand, masculinity is commonly seen as the opposite of femininity.
Some masculine behaviours—including masculine linguistic behaviours—could be
considered aggressive and commanding and some actions like swearing continue to be an essential part of masculine speech (Coates, 2005). However, in recent years the notion of masculinity has developed a symbolic change, as with the portrayal of femininity. In this case, the social change leads to a confrontation with masculine speech styles. At the same time, this confrontation may be truly beneficial since it enables people to explore new identities (Mills, 2003).

Therefore, we may adopt particular behaviours within a community, that is, assumptions about gender that are socially rooted. We will be able then to produce those stereotypes, but at the same time, to question them by means of linguistic productions. Nevertheless, stereotypes are usually exhibited in the linguistic constructions that some individuals produce consciously within a specific context. As a general definition, Mills (2003) claims the following:

Stereotypes of gender, developed in the interaction between the individual and the society as a whole, and within specific communities of practice, inform individual choice of linguistic style, strategy and content, either in terms of reaffirming or challenging those stereotypes in relation to one's own linguistic production or in relation to someone's assumption about one's own gendered identity. (p. 190)

Added to that, Judith Butler (1990) points out that individuals are not passive operators who represent the social values and particular behaviours of a community, but rather active performers who can vary their linguistic behaviours, since our body is not ‘passive’ or invariable:

One might reasonably suspect that some common linguistic restriction on thought both forms and limits the terms of the debate. Within those terms, “the body” appears as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself. In either case, the body is figured as a mere instrument or medium for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related. But (in fact) “the body” is itself a construction. (pp. 12-13)

3. Heteronormativity, gender diversity and language use

Apart from the rigid boundaries of gender binary, there is another oppressive aspect regarding the social perception of sexual orientation. As a matter of fact, the societies
we live in perpetuate the assumption that heterosexuality —understood as the sexual attraction between people of different or opposite genders— is the common or natural sexual orientation. This situation has been described as heteronormativity—which has become increasingly popular recently—and defines a society in which heterosexuality is understood as the norm. In fact, Eve Sedgwick (1990) affirms that there has been a historical habit of establishing sexuality and heterosexuality as interchangeable elements, which is evidence of a homophobic attitude. This normative view of sexuality has led to the development of the idea of 'the closet' that has been analyzed by Sedgwick (1990), who states that "the relations of the closet—the relations of the known and the unknown, the explicit and the inexplicit around the homo/heterosexual definition—have the potential for being peculiarly revealing, in fact, about speech acts more generally" (p. 3).

Heterosexuality is, therefore, a social norm that is performed in the same manner as gender identity, since it encourages the idea of gender as a fixed opposition. In brief, it is essential to highlight Judith Butler's theory (1990) of performativity at this point. As she argues, gender identities do not pre-exist, that is, they are socially constructed and continuously performed by means of repeated actions, and Sedgwick (1990) also develops the same reflection:

The gay essentialist debate takes its form and premises from, and insistently refers to, a whole history of other nature/nurture or nature/culture debates, it partakes of a tradition of viewing culture as malleable relative to nature: that is, culture, unlike nature, is assumed to be the thing that can be changed ... I have often wondered what the basis was for our optimism about the malleability of culture by any one group or program. At any rate, never so far as I know has there been a sufficiently powerful place from which to argue that such (cultural) manipulations ... were not a right that belonged to anyone who might have the power to perform them. (p. 41)

Thus, the performative choices are also individual choices and not strictly related to a whole cultural group. That is, the particular choices of an individual locate that individual in a specific position, as well as "a subject pronoun positions the subject as the first person, the second or the third" (qtd. in Morrish, 2002, p. 178). In this sense,

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4 *Heteronormativity* is the term used to describe the belief that people belong to two opposite genders (male/female) and that heterosexuality is the general and conventional sexual orientation.
this paper addresses the linguistic choices made by individuals in order to show a particular gender identity or sexual orientation. Those performances may position individuals within normative or non-normative groups of people. Additionally, this has been recently analysed from the perspective of gay and lesbian speech which, in fact, may also vary according to external factors. That is, this field has also acknowledged the interference of other factors such as shame (Morrish, 2002), as well as the pressure imposed by 'heteronormativity' when making linguistic decisions.

3.1. Homosexual identities and discourse patterns

In this section, this paper will analyse Morrish's paper (2002), *The case of the indefinite pronoun*, about the controversial role of a lesbian teacher of linguistics in a classroom. As a matter of fact, some difficulties arise, as she explains, concerning the linguistic choices — and the possible effects — made by the teacher within a classroom.

Some teachers may want to 'pass' as straight, for the simple reason that they do not want to be perceived as the exception. The sensation of insecurity is widely spread, although it may not appear so, since heterosexuality has traditionally been considered the norm. In fact, as Morrish (2002) explains, insecurity about one's identity and the thought of a less authoritative image are some of the most relevant preoccupations among those teachers. The silence or the omission of one's own identity is also treated by others — including teachers — as an homophobic behaviour. Taylor, for instance, declares that "to participate in the construction of silence that surrounds lesbian lives, is not neutral, but an act of homophobia" (qtd. in Morrish, 2002, p. 180).

Morrish's paper does not suggest that the terms *homosexual* and *heterosexual* are opposites, nor that we have to act in a particular way depending on our identity, but rather she questions why we perform differently in specific contexts and in what ways we do it. In addition, she addresses the idea of visibility; the forms and the impact it may have on the audience. (Morrish, 2002). Additionally, there are a number of straight authors who are accustomed to work with personal examples. In other words, those authors commonly use personal situations as linguistic tools in order to support their conclusions. Morrish (2002) points out Peter Grundy as a clear example of this, for instance, in his work *Doing Pragmatics* (2013), where he deliberately writes the following:
"If I say it late at night, it may count as a way of excusing myself and getting off to bed before my wife."

"... it probably means that I do not want to get out of bed and will hopefully be interpreted by my wife..." (p. 10)

This instance is only a small amount of evidence of the normalcy of heterosexuality. As a matter of fact, if these examples were related to lesbian intimacy, the effect would be completely different. It is true, however, that modern studies seem to point to the outdated stance of this attitude, but if it were the case of a lesbian teacher showing her personal experiences, it would surprise more than one student, at least initially. Thus, this might be one of the main reasons why some homosexual teachers choose not to engage in personal conversations or, simply, personal linguistic examples. In fact, Morrish (2002) provides the reader with some examples from her own lectures5, in which she tries to show the complexity of paraphrasing the pronouns in her expressions:

"I once managed to dislodge my partner's hyoid bone when kissing" (...when I was kissing her: Subject/Object pronoun deletion and replaced with gerundive)

"Someone I speak to regularly on the phone gave up smoking recently and I didn't recognize her voice" (...my partner: Distancing/Depersonalizing by using indefinite pronoun and post modifier)

“This transcription is as my partner read it and that's a standard Mid-Western pronunciation" (...she has a: Demonstrative substitution for personal pronoun)...(p. 186)

Taking this into account, Morrish (2002) considers these linguistic ambiguities as a key means of revealing her lesbian identity to other homosexual students in the classroom. In addition, she claims that those students who are gay or lesbian could identify with her since they could be more used to this type of 'discourse patterns'. At the same time, she explains that she would probably go unnoticed by those straight students who may not have perceived anything 'strange' or unusual in her discourse (Morrish, 2002). For that reason, questions about the idea of being openly homosexual or not, may arise since the performance, in this case, is ambiguous. Finally, she asserts that in a nonverbal way she is 'out' of the closet, whereas in a linguistic way she is 'in' the closet, that is to say, the

5 Examples taken from "The case of the indefinite pronoun" (Morrish 186)
progression is not evident. For that reason, she also affirms that the real progress is visible when individuals perform their identity as gay or lesbian, being thus courageous and fearless about showing one's own identity (Morrish, 2002).

3.2. Other non-normative identities

The gender binary classification and the concept of heteronormativity that have been discussed previously in this paper present an enormous problem for other individuals who do not belong to normative identities. These limitations marginalize other possible identities and practices that do not represent the norm. However, as non-normative identities exist, it is contradictory to understand gender as a restricted division. Thus, in order to expand this analysis, this paper will present and define the most common non-normative\(^6\) identities that need to be considered at this point:

- **Transgender (Trans\(^7\))**: Applies to a person whose sex assignment at birth does not correspond with the(ir) gender identity.
- **Trans woman**: Applies to a person who was assigned male at birth but who identifies as a female.
- **Trans man**: Applies to a person who was assigned female at birth but who identifies as a male.
- **Cisgender**: A person whose sex assignment at birth corresponds with the(ir) gender identity.
- **Intersexed person**: The term used to refer to the situation in which a person's sexual organs or genitalia differ from the male/female patterns.
- **Drag Queen**: A male who does a performance emphasising traditional female behaviours.
- **Drag King**: A female who does a performance emphasising traditional male behaviours.
- **Gender fluid**: A person who may feel female, male, both or neither depending on the day or the situation.
- **Genderqueer**: A person who do not identify as a female or male.
- **Gender Nonconforming or Non-binary**: When a person's gender expression (the way a person dresses and acts) does not fit what it is considered to be female or male.

\(^6\) Terminology taken from Green and Peterson, see "LGBTTSQI terminology" for more information.

\(^7\) The word *transgender* is usually shortened to *trans* since it is a broader term. It is preferable to use the terms and language that people prefer.
Taking this into consideration, it can be inferred that assumptions about the binary classification are continuously challenged and that there is not a fundamental or universal dichotomy in relation to gender. Together with language, our understanding of gender has changed enormously in the past decades. Additionally, the non-normative gender identities experienced by people have been revealed by means of new concepts and words. For that reason, language is undoubtedly a crucial factor to shape our thoughts and understanding and it is, in fact, continuously changing and evolving.

3.3. Coming out as a transgender

This paper has argued that coming out as a lesbian in a classroom setting might constitute a problem for those teachers who feel the pressure of heteronormativity. This topic has been extensively analysed by numerous scholars —mainly in Western societies. However, this field has suffered a number of limitations since most of these studies have not acknowledged other possible gender identities beyond the homo/heterosexual binary. Indeed, transgender experiences have not been taken into consideration until relatively recently. Coming out as a transgender involves a completely different experience since there is more than one possibility when coming out as a trans individual (Zimman, 2009).

First of all, it is traditionally considered that coming out as a transgender individual involves revealing or announcing one's own gender identity to people who may be assuming another identity. However, the action of coming out can also occur when the gender identity of a trans individual is aligned with the perception of others. Thus, in this case, the process of coming out refers to the revelation of the personal transition from one ‘gender’ to the other (Zimman, 2009). Nevertheless, Zimman (2009) also states that "many trans people do not see themselves as women becoming men or vice versa, and may even assert that it is impossible to change one's gender, insofar as gender is conceptualized as an internal ... or even spiritual —rather than social or biological— state" (p. 71).

Additionally, the action of coming out has traditionally been analysed from a dichotomous distinction (homo/heterosexual) which complicates the empowerment of other non-normative identities (Zimman, 2009). For that reason, more attention needs to be given to the experiences of other minority identities, such as trans or gender nonconforming individuals, in order to avoid general assumptions about their realities.
Finally, it is important to highlight that coming out as a trans is an absolutely personal experience and different for everybody. Moreover, regarding their use of language, it is possible that those trans and gender nonconforming individuals may prefer to use alternative and neutral pronouns as for example they/them. As Wayne (2005) asserts, "gender neutrality in our everyday referencing praxis extends the goal of creating non prejudicial social norms ... [and] allows for wider acceptance in linguistic practice" (p. 89).

3.4. Language and non-binary gender identities

3.4.1. English pronouns and gender neutrality

Many gender queer and gender nonconforming people have encountered difficulties in trying to refer to themselves in a gender-neutral way. It is true that Modern English lacks a noun class system in which nouns are marked in relation to gender, that is, Modern English is mostly gender-neutral. Nevertheless, there are some significant exceptions, for example, in the pronoun system; specifically, in the third person singular pronouns he and she, as well as in some nouns traditionally classified as masculine or feminine (e.g. poet/poetess). Nonetheless, grammatical gender can be found in other Indo-European languages such as Spanish or German (Wong, 2017).

In German, one such example is die Zeitung (the newspaper in English) which is marked by the definite feminine article die; in Spanish, el libro (the book in English), marked by the definite masculine article el. However, English works with gender neutral forms, in fact as Balhorn (2004) states, "the vast majority of human denoting NPs in English are formally epicene\(^8\)" (p. 82). Nonetheless, apart from the third person singular pronouns, a few gendered noun forms can be highlighted, such as waiter/waitress or hero/heroine.

Thus, English pronouns denote no gender, except for the third person singular pronouns he and she. The first person singular and plural pronouns I and we have no gender, neither do the second person pronouns you, or the third person plural pronoun they. In Spanish, on the contrary, except for the first and second singular pronouns yo and tu, the other pronouns are marked by masculine (o) or feminine (a) endings, for instance, the first person plural pronouns nosotros/nosotras.

Although English is a gender-neutral language, it does not have a gender-neutral pronoun when referring to a single person. In this case, the default use of the pronoun he

\(^8\) That lacks characteristics of either sex (Epicene. (n.d.). In Merriam-Webster dictionary).
might occur, which is not only seen as a discriminatory and sexist generalisation, but also as gender non-inclusive. New pronouns have been created in order to produce gender inclusive forms. In Spanish, for instance, the gender-neutral forms elle/elles (and the ending -e/es) are commonly used, as in the following examples:

Elle vino a comer el sábado.
Elles no están acostumbradas a tanto alboroto.

In English, indeed, a large list of gender-neutral options have been available for a long time. Nevertheless, the lack of agreement between the users has become a major problem for the implementation of those forms (Gender-Neutral Pronoun, 2010). This paper presents, in table 1, some of the most common gender-neutral pronouns used by people who may not identify with the traditional forms he/him/his/himself or she/her/hers/herself.

### Table 1
Taken and adapted from Gender Neutral Pronoun Blog, 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Traditional pronouns</strong></th>
<th><strong>Nominative (Subject)</strong></th>
<th><strong>Objective (Object)</strong></th>
<th><strong>Possessive determiner</strong></th>
<th><strong>Possessive pronoun</strong></th>
<th><strong>Reflexive</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>He/him/his/himself</strong></td>
<td>He sings</td>
<td>I sing about him</td>
<td>His song is catchy</td>
<td>That is his</td>
<td>He likes himself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>She/her/hers/herself</strong></td>
<td>She sings</td>
<td>I sing about her</td>
<td>Her song is catchy</td>
<td>That is hers</td>
<td>She likes herself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender-neutral pronouns</strong></td>
<td><strong>Nominative (Subject)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Objective (Object)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Possessive determiner</strong></td>
<td><strong>Possessive pronoun</strong></td>
<td><strong>Reflexive</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ze/hir/hirs/hirself</td>
<td>Ze sings</td>
<td>I sing about hir</td>
<td>Hirs song is catchy</td>
<td>That is hirs</td>
<td>Ze likes hirself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ze/zir/zirs/zirself</td>
<td>Ze sings</td>
<td>I sing about zir</td>
<td>Zirs song is catchy</td>
<td>That is zirs</td>
<td>Ze likes zirself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They/them/their/theirs/themselves</td>
<td>They sing</td>
<td>I sing about them</td>
<td>Their song is catchy</td>
<td>That is theirs</td>
<td>They like themselves</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.4.2. Singular they

Nowadays, the most common gender-neutral option in English is the third person singular pronoun they. However, it is frequently seen as an ungrammatical construction, presumably because of the presence of the plural they. Nevertheless, the use of the singular they goes back to distant times. Incidentally, we must not forget that before the loss of grammatical gender in the thirteenth century, nouns were masculine, feminine or neuter in Old English. According to some scholars, the generic singular they was the consequent result of that loss around the fourteenth century (Balhorn, 2004).

Regarding the precise origin of the word, some scholars assert that the third person singular they was borrowed by the Anglo-Saxons who lived alongside Scandinavian settlers in the north east of England in the late Old English period, and was already established in the south at the time of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales around the year 1400 (Balhorn, 2004). As a matter of fact, Balhorn (2004) states that "the late fourteenth-century English of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales is a variety only one or two generations removed from a language system that retained elements of grammatical gender" (p. 89). Moreover, other relevant authors such as William Shakespeare have made use of the singular they in their works, for instance in The Comedy of Errors (Act IV, scene III) where Shakespeare formulates the following construction: "There's not a man I meet but doth salute me/ as if I were their well-acquainted friend" (1-2).

Traditionally, as in Shakespeare’s example, the singular they is positioned after an antecedent —which is singular— of unknown gender. This construction has been in use for centuries. It is highly possible, however, that for some traditionalists the use of the singular gender-neutral pronoun they is still ungrammatical and inappropriate since its conception as a non-binary pronoun is relatively new (Wayne, 2005). Nevertheless, it is unquestionably relevant to bring into widespread use the gender-neutral forms —even though they can be considered ungrammatical— in order to create a supportive atmosphere for those individuals who reject the gender binary. It is important not only for those individuals who transition from one gender 'category' to another, but also for those who are not defined as male or female. For that reason, this implies the supportive use and the reinforcement of new words and concepts that describe those identities.

3.4.3. The honorific title Mx

Some transgender authors have shared their experiences about the language or the common titles that are traditionally used in healthcare systems. In English, the most
common honorific titles used to indicate respect are *Mr*, *Ms*, *Mrs* and *Miss*. Apart from those titles, new bureaucratic alternatives, such as *Mx* (pronounced like 'Miks' or 'Muks'), have been promoted by some individuals who try to define themselves outside the established limits of gender binary (Richards et al., 2016).

The gender-neutral title *Mx* is a form of address for those individuals who prefer to use a non-binary status. Nowadays, this term is not only extensively widespread, but is also included in many English dictionaries, such as in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary. In truth, the usage of gender-neutral alternatives is vital in order to be respectful and, most importantly, to avoid trans non-inclusive situations that are still common in healthcare institutions, as in the following case:

One clinic called people in for appointments by putting names up on a big screen. I sat there shaking, because I didn’t know what would happen. In the end, they had my name right, but my title was still Mr. When I got up to go in and meet the doctor, I could feel everyone in the room looking at me and wondering. (qtd. in Lewis et. al. 2017, p. 1)

Added to that, healthcare institutions are not the only social areas in which gender non-inclusive situations are still in constant flux. In fact, all social spheres are affected since gender-neutral titles and pronouns are not exclusively used in particular institutions. In the educational context, for example, language plays an extremely important role since there is a direct contact with people and, in most cases, the language that is used in classrooms will produce an impact on how students understand the world. Additionally, some teachers and students may prefer to use specific gender-neutral pronouns or names which should be a fundamental right in any situation.

However, in some cases these rights are violated since some individuals do not accept or understand non-normative identities. As a matter of fact, according to the article by Rozsa (2017) in *The Washington Post*, a transgender teacher was relocated from their regular classroom with children since they preferred the gender neutral pronouns *they/them/their* and the prefix *Mx*. Apparently, some parents complained about the teacher’s preferences and the impact this would have on the students—which indicates a transphobic attitude. The teacher Bressack declared the following:

I had people look me in the eye and tell me that I am selfish for being a teacher, selfish for putting myself in a position where I am around children and exposing
them to the transgender lifestyle, whatever that is … I will not be spending my entire life pretending to be someone that I am not. (qtd. in Rozsa, 2017)

It is highly important to support trans and non-binary identities in public institutions and, particularly, in educational contexts. In fact, not only teachers but also students may require a respectful and supportive environment within the classroom since some of them may identify as trans and may prefer gender-neutral pronouns as well.

3.4.4. The appropriation of words

This paper has argued that language has the power to create new pronouns, words and concepts, but at the same time, to construct identities. Likewise, language has the power to create more visibility for individuals outside of the norm. One instance could be the initialism LGBTQI, which stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and intersex community (Green and Peterson, 2006). This common abbreviation has become an essential factor or mechanism that not only supports this community, but also creates visibility and facilitates the empowerment of individuals who are situated outside of the norm.

On the other hand, language has the power to damage and degrade, particularly the language of those individuals who belong to normative identities and, thus, make use of the privileges they possess, if only because of the creation of labels and the treatment of normative identities as ‘normal’:

Linguists often ignore the power dynamics implicit in treating one class of phenomena as ordinary and another as marked, but queer theorists have time and again exposed the structural violence that can come from ignoring the power differentials that privilege some individuals as normal and (...) others as queer. (Davis, Zimman, & Raclaw, 2014, p. 9)

Consequently, marginalized people become the focal point towards which all the abuse is directed, which highly encourages the development “of mental and behavioral concerns such as depression (and) anxiety” (Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2015, p. 255). However, this abuse has been redirected on numerous occasions, that is, words that are originally negative and offensive have been appropriated by the members of marginalized communities. As a result, those words that were initially intended to offend and hurt are transformed into tools of community empowerment (Wong, 2017). Brontsema (2004) asserts that “linguistic reclamation, also known as linguistic
redefinition or appropriation, refers to the appropriation of a pejorative epithet by its target” (p. 1), that is, language has the power to redefine and revalue already existing concepts. Taking this into consideration, the word *queer* —traditionally defined as ‘strange’— is one of the most evident examples. Nowadays, this term is interchangeable with the initialism LGBTQI, but as Wong (2017) states, “with the added benefit of not limiting people to more limiting labels such as those denoted in the LGBTQ(I) acronym” (p. 9).

The first public reclamation of the term *queer* was effectuated by Queer Nation, a group created in 1990 by some members from ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). This group evolved over time in a more operative activism and they used the name ‘Queer Nation’ as a vindication of homosexual pride (Brontsema, 2004, p. 4). Nowadays, this term is fully integrated in society and it is commonly used to refer to people who are located outside the limits of heteronormativity and gender binary. Nonetheless, Wong (2017) states that “reclaiming language never means just taking back a term, but also necessitates reinterpreting its definition and the contexts in which it is used” (p. 46). In this case, the purpose was to demonstrate that diversity —gender diversity in this sense— is not negative or offensive. Additionally, the form and the circumstances in which a word is reclaimed should always belong to the minority groups that have been oppressed and marginalized (Wong, 2017).

In brief, the appropriation of words is a long-established process that allows the empowerment of individuals who were oppressed by them at first. As a matter of fact, the initial meaning of the word *queer* was intended to be offensive. However, its meaning or value was redefined, enabling new forms of subversion and self-determination for those who have been historically excluded and oppressed because of their gender identity (Wong, 2017).

### 4. Conclusion

This paper has argued that gender encompasses a wide variety of possibilities regarding identities and practices. At the same time, it has demonstrated that individuals use language as a tool for constructing and revealing identities. Therefore, returning to the questions asked during the introduction, it is possible to argue that language has the power to create new gender identities and thus to shape our thoughts and understanding of the world.
Following Butler's performativity theory, this paper has shown that gender is not a preexisting or natural trait within the body, but rather a process that is being undertaken continuously by means of repeated actions such as verbal and non-verbal acts. Thus, the analysis of these considerations supports the idea that something that is not performed or showed, does not exist in the real world. That is, the linguistic choices made by individuals locate those individuals in a particular position regarding their identity. For that reason, there is a need to ensure a wide variety of options in order to perform a particular identity, especially among people who prefer gender-neutral options. Consequently, the use of a gender inclusive language enables the performance and creation of gender identities, as well as a better understanding of the world.

Nevertheless, there are some limitations to this study, which are related to the unlimited number of gender identities that it is possible to perform, along with the context variables in each individual case. For that reason, some researchers have suggested that new gender-neutral options are often unnecessary and ungrammatical. In such instances, this could be in part due to the rejection of more complex linguistic structures or due to the underestimation of non-normative identities. At the same time, there is generally a lack of consensus or unity regarding the use of gender-neutral options among the promoters of the idea, which also complicates the social implementation of new gender-neutral terms.

This paper opens up new opportunities for further contributions to the field. It examines the significance of gender within the field of sociolinguistics and the role of language in the development of a more gender inclusive world. Further research should examine the social changes in relation with gender and the role of language in this process.
References


