

Ideologies towards Gender-inclusive language in situations of minoritization: the case of Catalan*

Eva J. Daussà

ACLC, University of Amsterdam

The adherence to measures designed to eliminate the linguistic expression of sexism and to mitigate patterns of patriarchalism can become an index of linguistic vitality in the case of small or minoritized languages (Popic & Gorjanc 2018, Hornsby et al. 2021). Here evidence is drawn from Catalan, a mid-size minoritized language that has developed its gender-neutral variety in all its grammatical complexity, as compiled by a recent (2023) publication of a non-binary language guide by a group of grassroots gender activists. Academic and institutional bodies as well as users themselves have reacted to it loudly. Both officially issued documents and an analysis of attitudes and opinions manifested on the social platform X, reveal familiar language ideologies involving notions of authority, purity, and legitimacy, as well as narratives reminiscent of linguistic determinism, and language politization/weaponization. Insofar as the debate also revolves around the issue of language survival, some fear that vulnerable languages might not be able to endure such divisive debates, while others claim that alienating minority users from trendy debates around the struggle for gender equality contributes to their shifting towards languages that might offer more suitable expressive possibilities.

1 Introduction: binarity in gender and in language studies

Traditional characterizations of gender and sexuality have been anchored on rigid binary oppositions (man/woman, masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual) as well as on an essentialist view separating the biological and the cultural, the practice and the desire. Moreover, a crude hierarchy of domination within the poles of these categories has been asserted, giving rise to the well-known cultural, psychological, and social dynamics rooted in an hegemonic patriarchal mindset (Beauvoir 1949; Butler 1990, 2025; Haraway 1991; Braidotti 2021).

* My heartfelt gratitude to many inspiring colleagues and dear friends who have shaped my understanding of this topic, with special mention to René Pera i Ros and Sebastian Daussà. Thank you also to the colleagues who edit and publish the LiA papers, with admirable professional and intellectual dedication in spite of increasing ungrateful demands on their time.

In the domain of linguistics, existing grammatical paradigms of nominal morphology based on ‘gender’ have also been anchored on the poles of the *masculine* and the *feminine* whenever possible. In non-Indo-European languages, more complex systems arise on the basis of other salient, perceived, or imputed characteristics of the entity to which an associated noun refers, involving humanness, shape, form, sex, consistency, or function (Aikhenvald 2006). Yet except some instances like Lakota’s *third* gender, used to refer to individuals who embody both feminine and masculine qualities (Abbou & Baider 2016), paradigms thought to relate to the sex of the referent have generally been seen as adhering to this pattern of binarity and essentialism of the gender dimension, linguistically reaffirming it across cultures.

Likewise, the hierarchy of domination has found its place in linguistic theory in, for example, assigning one of the pole categories, mainly the masculine, the capability of signifying the whole (in the so-called *inclusive masculine*) or the unknown (as in the *generic masculine*), and indeed being characterized as the unmarked form, a privilege of default-ness reserved for the dominant category. This asymmetrical form of grammatical metonymy invisibilizes all other categories, demonstrably skewing the information in a consistent manner (Gustafsson et al. 2021). Far from being just a communication bias, decades of studies have documented the material consequences of such phenomena, such as women using female job titles being less likely to be hired than those who use masculine job titles (Formanowicz et al. 2013), or preventing them from applying to certain jobs (Bem & Bem 1973). While it might be difficult to separate linguistic from cultural factors, when the two reinforce each other in the same direction, a gender bias can be confidently pronounced.

2 Queer theory and queer linguistics

Contemporary theories of gender and sexuality have however moved beyond the binary and the essentialist to embrace a multiplicity of gender identities and sexual preferences that are agentively defined and enacted by the individual. Building on early ideas by Derrida, Deleuze, Butler, and Haraway, this new conceptualization of gender, now known as *Queer Theory* (a term coined by de Lauretis 1991), rejects strict boundaries of identification in favor of gender continuums and spectrums, in an attempt to capture the inherent ambiguity in all kinds of self-definition and their fluidity over time and space.

In its process of gender construction and enactment, language surfaces as an important element (Butler 1990), and the consequences of the interaction between language, cognition, and social practices have been amply investigated. There are numerous studies showing, for example that using the generic masculine to refer to everyone reproduces androcentric ideas that man occupies a

central position by norm and default, while all other genders (for example women) are the exception (e.g., Boroditsky et al. 2003; Stahlberg et al. 2007; Everett 2011; Kaufmann & Böhner 2014; Coady 2018). On the other hand, there's also evidence of the effectiveness of using a more neutral language (for example, an epicene¹ or gender-neutral pronouns) in order to reduce the stereotyping and the discrimination linked to gender (Stahlberg et al. 2001; Gustafsson Sendén et al. 2015; Sczesny et al. 2016; Brutt-Griffler & Kim 2017; Shoham & Kee 2018). Moreover, for some individuals and groups (mainly feminists, and people who are transgender, non-binary or in some way gender non-conforming), using gender-neutral language offers a very valuable opportunity to express oneself and to enact one's gender identities beyond the limitations imposed by the rigid structures of binary and (cishetero)normative gender (Butler 1990; Zimman 2018). While it is acknowledged that true neutrality in language in its strictest sense might be unachievable, some linguistic forms might be closer to it than others (Bradley 2025).

Insofar as it turns to language matters, Queer Linguistics (a term coined by Livia & Hall 1997) is born with the aim of applying the principles of Queer Theory to linguistic analysis. It does so by examining the ways in which speakers use language to negotiate their gender identities within the discursive limitations imposed by the established normativity, and documenting ways in which they either repeat it or challenge it with their own linguistic behavior (Motschembacher 2015; Navarro-Carrascosa 2021). In this sense, the study of gender-neutral or non-binary morphemes, which is the main focus of this paper, falls within the scope of Queer Linguistics. Moreover, this perspective sees itself in line with similar movements advocating against the practices of exclusion, abuse, violence, and discrimination, including by weaponizing language against groups and individuals that are constructed as non-normative.

3 Gender-neutral (Catalan) language

In order to achieve the linguistic expression of queer identities and experiences, thus, it is necessary to step out of linguistic practices that reinforce the patriarchal androcentrism that prioritizes one gender over the others. One strategy is the coinage of innovative linguistic forms that allow users to express themselves in their own language and in equal terms. Subsumed under the label of Gender-Inclusive Language (GIL; but see Pfalzgraf 2025 for other labels), the innovation concerns the lexical, discursive, syntactic, and morphological domains. Recently, it is the latter that has attracted the most attention, in the debate around neo-

¹ An epicene is a noun that might design referents of any sex (for example, *baby*, *victim*, *etc*).

pronouns and, in languages with a complex morphological gender paradigm, neo-morphemes.

Grammatically, normative Catalan mirrors all other Romance languages in having a binary paradigm for its nominal gender system. The traditional labels of masculine and feminine go beyond sexed or gendered referents, but rather act as obligatory grammatical classifiers extended to all nominal elements, necessitating agreement when in the same referential phrase. The masculine is considered the *unmarked* form, and often has no overt morpheme; the feminine is marked with the suffix /ə/, written as <a> (or <e> in the plural). Crucially, the norm dictates that the masculine be used also both as a generic and for references with mixed or unknown genders. In spite of a long tradition exposing the androcentrism of the practice (e.g., Monzó-Nebot 2021), the official language authorities still stand by it (IEC 2023). Normatively, no expression beyond the binary is acknowledged (IEC 2023).

Several proposals have been made recently both challenging the generic use of the grammatical masculine, as well as finding ways to avoid the misgendering of individuals outside of the binary. In addition to reduplications and epicenes, the neo-morpheme /i/ <i> is the most popular variety in Catalan GIL, although there are some other variants in use (Moyano 2023).

Institutional response quickly condemned the usage. The *Institut d'Estudis Catalans* (IEC) issued an extraordinary statement stating that, in Catalan, the grammatical masculine gender was the non-marked form to represent both groups with individuals of diverse genders, as well as to refer to people of unknown or underspecified genders. It rejected any attempts at GIL on the basis that they were but *cumbersome duplications* and *unpronounceable symbols* that were *unnecessary*. Briefly, it also pronounced its verdict for the neo-allomorph, stating that such form “falls outside of the normative and grammatical frame” of Catalan, and that it does not correspond to “a natural strategy of the Catalan language, but rather it has been invented by artificially manipulating the internal functioning of the language, and, therefore, it contradicts [...] the internal rules of Catalan” (IEC 2023).

The phenomenon also attracted the attention of numerous media articles and tv appearances (Erdocia & Soler 2022; Daussà & Hornsby 2025). In a study of social media reactions by individuals, Daussà and Pera (2024a,b) analyzed the recurrent themes. Interestingly, while some saw the linguistic innovation as a positive development in the ongoing struggle for visibility and inclusion of gender diversity, others used the proposals to further the marginalization of gender minorities, in this case through their linguistic variety. When the pronouncement of the IEC was published, some individuals felt legitimized in disqualifying the innovation, and they were quick to echo homophobic and genderphobic

discourses while rejecting the linguistic variety, in what Daussà and Pera-Ros (2024b) identify as a form of *linguistic lawfare* that weaponized the linguistic norm. Interestingly, the public debate revolved around whether the authority to decide what is and is not acceptable in a language is established and contested through interaction (and even allowing for a pluricentricity of the linguistic norm in the sense of Clyne 1992), or rather should be delegated to the authority of certain institutions. Other themes are summarized in the table below (from the original article).

Table 1: Thematic analysis in social media reactions (Daussà & Pera-Ros 2024b).

Theme	Definition
Attack <i>ad hominem</i> through their language (LGBTQ-phobia)	Insults and threats directed to the queer community through the rejection of their linguistic variety
<i>Lawfare</i>	Use of the linguistic normative by the authority in order to exclude or marginalize the linguistic variety of a group by discrediting their legitimacy
Pluricentricity of the norm	Recognition that the linguistic form can be determined through more than one source that legitimates it
Linguistic empowerment	Reappropriation of linguistic legitimacy by users in order to keep its expressive possibilities
Catalan as a minorized language	Linguistic change seen as either language degradation, or sign of vitality
Catalan in the global language ecology	Comparison with other languages in order to justify and legitimize (the shape of) Catalan language
Affiliation to other social struggles	Comparison with other initiatives that pursue social equity

Most of these themes are of course used to structure narratives around GIL in the context of other languages. What makes the case of Catalan interesting is that there are additional arguments being put forth that refer to its situation of sociolinguistic minoritization, to which we turn in the next section.

4 Language minoritization and linguistic innovation

Language revitalization has been largely conceptualized following Fishman's (1991) fixation on family transmission in order to increase 'native speakers'. However, many scholars point out that this approach underestimates the many influences in linguistic development and language preference, and moreover it excludes non-reproducing families from the equation of language revitalization (Romaine 2006; Hornsby & Walsh 2025; Cashman 2018). This focus on family transmission results in the exclusion of gender-nonconforming users; in contrast, the case of GIL shows one way in which queer speakers of a minoritized language who are committed to their language thriving can contribute to revitalization efforts.

And much might be at stake. Queer speakers such as non-binary ones, faced with the impossibility to express themselves in their language, are faced with three options: misgender themselves, change their language, or abandon it by switching to a language that does — a move that invariably benefits hegemonic languages (Olid 2018, Pera-Ros 2021, Daussà & Hornsby to appear). In fact, this is why many queer speakers are already favoring English (Leap & Boellstorff 2004). Many authors have warned that, if minoritized languages lag behind in the change, they will lose speakers (Popic & Gorjanc 2018; Olid 2021; Pera 2021; Hornsby et al. 2021; Daussà & Hornsby to appear).

From this perspective, grassroots initiatives in which language activists come up with proposals to expand the expressive possibilities of their struggling language instead of giving up on it, deserve the full attention in a revitalization agenda.

5 Conclusion

The struggle against androcentrism and gender discrimination necessitates changing the linguistic expression of these phenomena, so users across the world are coining gender-inclusive varieties of their languages. Specifically, for some individuals (notably, feminists, transgender, and gender-nonconforming groups), gender-inclusive language offers a valuable opportunity to express and perform their gender identities beyond the rigid boundaries of traditionally binary and (heterocis)normative linguistic structures.

Institutions and users respond both positively and negatively to GIL, uncovering the ideological forces behind linguistic ownership, and the role of language in the psychosocial and cultural lives of its users. Moreover, the way these tensions are managed by the linguistic community might have an impact on processes of language maintenance and shift.

Insofar as (queer) linguistics aims to have social relevance, the topic will keep being important for as long as speaking about inclusion causes controversy, and the use of inclusive linguistic forms is perceived as something political and minoritized, because that means that by talking about inclusion, one is questioning the dominant hegemony of gender binarism and male gender supremacy. Moreover, it will keep being important insofar as there are individuals in our linguistic community that encounter in language a reflection of the exclusive practices of our society, and they want to fight them through changes in their languages (instead of, for example, shifting languages). In the case of minoritized languages, the issue has the additional relevance, because minority languages are often linked to traditional values (Walsh 2022), and yet their adherence to practices reflecting societal trends might be indexical of their ability for modernization and inclusion. It might therefore affect the vitality of endangered or minoritized languages, as speakers tend to align their language choices with their ideologies.

6 References

- Abbou, J. & Baider, F. H. (2006). *Gender, language and the periphery*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Aikhenvald, A (2006). Classifiers and noun classes: Semantics. *Encyclopaedia of language and linguistics*, 463–471.
- Boroditsky, L., Schmidt, L.A., & Phillips, W. (2003). ‘Sex, syntax, and semantics’. In D. Getner & S. Goldin-Meadow (Eds.), *Language in mind: advances in the study of language and thought* (pp 61–79). MIT Press.
- Braidotti, R. (2021). *Posthuman feminism*. Polity Press.
- Bem, S. L., & Bem, D. J. (1973). Does sex-biased job advertising “aid and abet” sex discrimination? *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 3(1), 6–18.
- Bradley, E. D. (2025). You can’t be gender-neutral on a moving train: Inclusivity and non-binarity in English. In F. Pfalzgraf (Ed.), *Gender-inclusive language: Findings from 14 languages and open research questions* (pp. 107–117). De Gruyter..
- Brutt-Griffler, J., & Kim, S. (2017). In their own voices: development of English as a gender-neutral language. *English Today*, 34(1), 12–19.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2025). *Who’s afraid of gender?* Penguin Books Ltd.
- Cashman, H. (2018). *Queer, Latinx, and bilingual: Narrative resources in the negotiation of identities*. Routledge.

- Clyne, M. (1992). *Pluricentric languages: Differing norms in different nations*. Mouton de Gruyter.
- Coady, A (2018). The origin of sexism in language. *Gender and language* 12(3), 271–293.
- Daussà, E. J. & Hornsby, M. (to appear). Gender-neutral language in situations of minoritisation: Some examples from Catalan and Breton. In F. Pfalzgraf (Ed.), *Gender-inclusive language: Findings from 14 languages and open research questions* (pp. XX). De Gruyter.
- Daussà, E. J. & Pera-Ros, R. (2024a). The battle for authority, legitimacy and agency in the Twitter fields of the Catalan gender-neutral linguistic revolution. In J. Walsh, M. Hornsby, E. J. Daussà, R. Pera-Ros, S. Parker, J. Morris, & H. R. Cashman (Eds.), *Queering language revitalisation: navigating identity and inclusion among queer speakers of minority languages* (pp. 42–60). Cambridge University Press.
- Daussà, E. J., & Pera Ros, R (2024b). Lawfare lingüístic contra el llenguatge inclusiu a la trinxera d’X. In M. Wallace & E. Monzó-Nebot (Eds.), *Gender and ethnolinguistic lawfare [Special issue]. Just: Journal of Language Rights & Minorities, Revista de Drets Lingüístics i Minories* 3(2), 187–221.
- De Beauvoir, S. (1949). *Le deuxième sex*. Gallimard.
- Erdocia, I. & Soler, J. (2022). Sociolinguists and their publics: Epistemological tension and disciplinary contestation over language in Catalonia. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 26(1), 45–64.
- Everett, C. (2011). Gender, pronouns, and thought: the ligature between epicene pronouns and a more neutral gender perception. *Gender and Language* 5(1), 133–152.
- Fishman, J. (1991). *Reversing language shift: Theoretical and empirical foundations of assistance to threatened languages*. Multilingual Matters.
- Formanowicz, M., Bedynska, S., Cislak, A., Braun, F., & Sczesny, S. (2012). Side effects of genderfair language: How feminine job titles influence the evaluation of female applicants. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 43(1), 62–71.
- Gustafsson Sendén, M., Bäck, E. A., & Lindqvist, A. (2015). Introducing a gender-neutral pronoun in a natural gender language: the influence of time on attitudes and behavior. *Frontiers of Psychology*, 6, 893.
- Haraway, D. J. (1991). *Simians, cyborgs, and women: The reinvention of nature*. Routledge.
- Hornsby, M., Dołowy-Rybińska, N., Chojnicka, J. & Toutous, J. (2021). The ideological foundations of Breton and Lower Sorbian language revitalization through education and their consequences for new speakers. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 25(8). 2991–3004.
- IEC. (2023). *Actes de la sessió plenària del 20 d’octubre*. Secció Filològica de l’Institut d’Estudis Catalans.
- Kaufmann, C. & Bohner, G. (2014). Masculine generics and gender-aware alternatives in Spanish. *IZGOnZeit: Onlinezeitschrift des Interdisziplinären Zentrums für Geschlechterforschung (IZG)*, 8–17.

- Leap, W. L. & Boellstorff, T.. (2004). *Speaking in queer tongues: Globalization and gay Language*. University of Illinois Press.
- de Lauretis, T. (1991). Queer Theory: Lesbian and gay sexualities. *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 3(2), iii–xviii.
- Monzó-Nebot, E. (2021). La representació de la dona i els usos lingüístics: Revisió d'estudis sobre la interacció entre les formes masculines i el biaix de gènere. *Revista de Llengua i Dret/Journal of Language and Law*, 76, 141–168.
- Moyano, J. . (2023). *Guia gramatical del llenguatge no-binari*. Raig Verd.
- Motschembacher, H. (2011). Taking Queer Linguistics further: sociolinguistics and critical heteronormativity research. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 2011(212). 149–179.
- Navarro-Carrascosa, C. (2021). Nuevas terminaciones para nuevas realidades: performatividad, afiliación y atenuación en la comunidad de habla LGTBI. *Estudios de Lingüística. Universidad de Alicante* 35, 179–201.
- Olid, B. (2018). Amb 'i' d'inclusiva. *Jornada*. Retrieved from: <http://catalallengua.blogspot.com/2018/08/amb-i-dinclusiva.html>, 13 August 2018.
- Pera-Ros, R. (2021). Ell, ella, elli, In Junyent, C. (Ed.), *Som dones, som lingüistes, som moltes i diem prou* (pp. 193–194). Eumo Editorial.
- Pfalzgraf, F. (2025). *Gender-neutral, gender-fair, gender-inclusive. Towards Conceptual Clarity across European Languages*. Palgrave Macmillan Cham.
- Popic, D. and V. Gorjanc (2018.). Challenges of adopting gender-inclusive language in Slovene. *Suvremena Lingvistika* 44. 329-350.
- Romaine, S. (2006). Planning for the survival of linguistic diversity. *Language Policy* 5. 441–473.
- Sczesny, S., Formanowicz, M. & Moser, F. (2016). Can gender-fair language reduce gender stereotyping and discrimination? *Frontiers of Psychology*, 7, 25.
- Shoham, A., & Mook Lee, S. (2018). The causal impact of grammatical gender marking on gender wage inequality and country income inequality. *Business and Society* 57(6), 1216–1251.
- Stahlberg, D., Braun, F., Irmen, L., & Sczesny, S. (2007). Representation of the sexes in language. In K. Fiedler (Ed.), *Social Communication* (pp. 163–187). Psychology Press.
- Walsh, J. (2022). *One hundred years of Irish language policy, 1922–2022*. Peter Lang.
- Walsh, J. & Hornsby, M. (2025). Introduction: Queering language revitalisation. In J. Walsh, M. Hornsby, E. J. Daussà, R. Pera-Ros, S. Parker, J. Morris, & H. R. Cashman (Eds.), *Queering language revitalisation: navigating identity and inclusion among queer speakers of minority languages* (pp. 1–5). Cambridge University Press.
- Weinstein, J., & Colebrook, C. (2009). *Deleuze and gender*. Edinburgh University Press.

Zimman, L., (2018). Transgender voices: Insights on identity, embodiment, and the gender of the voice. *Language and Linguistics Compass* 12(8): e12284.

Eva J. Daussà

ACLC, University of Amsterdam

e.j.daussa@uva.nl