

Morphological Gender Innovations in Spanish of Genderqueer Speakers

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## 1. Abstract

The Spanish language features a morphological gender binary canonically marked by the suffixal morpheme -o for the masculine gender (e.g. *carro* 'car'), and -a for the feminine (e.g. *casa* 'house'). The constraints of this system present very few possibilities to recognize human subjects that don't identify within the biological masculine-feminine construct, and there is no morphological marker not assigned to one of the extant grammatical genders (Harris 1991). Prescriptive language academies like the *Real Academia Española* insist that all nouns can be described by masculine and feminine forms, and they reject usages that promote the existence of more than two morphological genders (Bosque 2012; Heredero 2007; Lomotey 2011). This opposition underscores morphological gender binaries as sexist at best, and transphobic at worst (Hord 2016).

Still, a number of innovations in morphological gender have been attested in the speech of genderqueer speakers, such as suffixal -x (*latinx* 'Latin'), suffixal -e (*latine* 'Latin'), and the pronoun *elle* 'they' (Diz Pico 2017; Group Anarquista Pirexia 2011). These forms have yet to be the subject of empirical research, nor are they currently championed by any official prescriptive language institution, which would afford them considerable legitimacy (Lara Icaza 2014). To investigate current usages and attitudes towards these innovative non-binary forms, 11 genderqueer Spanish speakers, primarily from the California Bay Area, participated in sociolinguistic interviews. Quantitative and qualitative analyses show wide variation in the gender morphologies of these speakers, a result which serves to illuminate a global limitation of language, namely the conflation of biology with discrete, arbitrary categories, and to contextualize these innovations within natural processes of language variation and change (Labov 2001).

## 2. Grammatical Gender

### 2.1. Linguistics and the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

Grammatical gender is defined as a morphological system of nominal classification in which every noun pertains to one of the system's designated classes, called 'genders' (Thompson 2014: 2-3). In the case of Spanish, these morphological classes are canonically represented by the suffixes -o for the masculine gender (*el niño* 'boy') and -a for the feminine gender (*la niña* 'girl') (Eisenberg 1985: 191-196). The name 'gender' reflects the fact that in languages of this kind, words for human beings are assigned to a grammatical gender in agreement with traditional societal stereotypes about human biology—the idea that 'males' are masculine and 'females' are feminine. Moreover, the rules of morphosyntactic agreement stipulate that adjectives, articles, and verbs must agree with the grammatical gender of what they describe (Nissen 2002: 26). These agreements cause a conflation in the mind of the speaker of the concepts of human biology, grammatical gender, and the nominal class morphemes (Harris 1991: 28).

Latin had a morphological system with six nominal declensions and three genders that, aside from the masculine and feminine, included a neuter gender (see Table 2.1). Many inanimate nouns were marked by the neuter gender, and when Spanish descended from Latin, those nouns were reassigned to the masculine or feminine genders (Penny 2002: 114-126). From this redistribution came the overlap in gender marking of some Spanish nouns like *el clima* and *la mano* (Harris 1991: 27-41). Old English had a similar system to Latin, with four nominal declensions and the same three grammatical genders, but it lost almost all of its morphological complexity after the eleventh century (Jurczyk 2017: 209). However, this point is debated by linguists given that distinctions like 'actor/actress' and 'nurse/male nurse' still exist (Lemus 2001: 205). Even in modern Spanish, semblances of the neuter gender have

TABLE 2.1: PENNY (2002)

LATIN (NEUTER GENDER)	GENDER IN SPANISH	FORM IN SPANISH
vīnum	M	vino
lac	F	leche
nōmen	M	nombre
legūmen	F	legumbre

remained in the system of demonstratives (*lo, esto, ello, aquello*), but this class resembles the masculine gender (Harris 1991: 41; Eisenberg 1985: 191-192).

Even though there are only two grammatical genders in Spanish, other languages have more obscure genders, like the vegetative (see Table 2.2), that classifies inanimate nouns, edible objects, or things related to nature, depending on the language (Boroditsky et al. 2003: 63-64; Plaster and Polinsky 2007: 2-4). But no assignment of grammatical gender is arbitrary for words referring to people; every speaker categorizes the gender of people as they perceive it according to their experience of the world (Boroditsky et al. 2003: 64-65). At this point, the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis must be introduced, which postulates that “language reflects a certain perception of reality” by establishing a finite number of possible interpretations of the world based on the constraints of the language (Heredero 2007: 87-90, author’s translation). In other words, because there are only two categories for gender, which are conflated with human biology in the minds of speakers, and people are always categorized within that binary, it becomes difficult to imagine another category.

To test if the influence of grammatical gender extends outside of linguistic thought, Boroditsky, Schmidt, and Phillips (2003) created three versions of a task designed to show differences in perception. First, they taught bilingual participants (Spanish-English, Spanish-German) proper names for 24 objects. It resulted that participants remembered the proper names better if they agreed with the grammatical gender of the object in their language. In the following task, 24 objects

TABLE 2.2: BACHMAIR 1771; PLASTER AND POLINKSY 2007

SPANISH	GERMAN	DYIRBAL
<b>Masculine</b>	<b>Masculine</b>	<b>Masculine</b>
el hombre ( <i>man</i> ) el presidente ( <i>president</i> )	der Mann ( <i>man</i> ) der König ( <i>king</i> )	<i>nouns related to men</i> <i>masculinity</i> <i>animacy</i>
el libro ( <i>book</i> )	der Diamant ( <i>diamond</i> )	
<b>Feminine</b>	<b>Feminine</b>	<b>Feminine</b>
la mujer ( <i>woman</i> ) la estudiante ( <i>f. student</i> )	die Mädchen ( <i>woman</i> ) die Krankenschwester ( <i>nurse</i> )	<i>nouns related to women</i> <i>femininity</i> <i>human violence</i> <i>natural disasters</i>
la familia ( <i>family</i> )	die Küche ( <i>kitchen</i> )	
	<b>Neuter</b>	<b>Neuter</b>
	das Buch ( <i>book</i> ) das Fieber ( <i>fever</i> ) das Ohr ( <i>ear</i> )	<i>plants</i> <i>edible things</i>
		<b>Vegetative</b>
		<i>all other nouns</i> <i>inanimate objects not</i> <i>pertaining to another</i> <i>category</i>

that had opposite grammatical genders in the two languages were selected. They then asked participants to give three adjectives for each object, in English. The adjectives that resulted were classified by English speakers according to their perceptions of the adjectives' masculinity or femininity. If the word was feminine in the language of the participant (e.g. *la llave*, 'key'), participants highlighted more prototypically feminine qualities like *shiny* and *cute*; if the word was masculine (e.g. *der Schlüssel*, 'key'), they responded that the object was *jagged* and *hard* (Lakoff 1973: 49-57). Even with the assignment of two fictitious genders, the "sopative" and the "oosative" (which corresponded with the feminine and masculine genders, respectively), the participants assigned qualitatively different adjectives based on the gender that the fictitious one represented (Boroditsky et al. 2003).

## 2.2. Feminist Theory and the RAE

The debate about linguistic sexism is divided into two camps: those who believe that the forms of the Spanish language are discriminatory as they are, and those who believe that perhaps the language isn't the problem, but rather the people that use it (Eisenberg 1985; Lomotey 2011). The feminism of the 1980s in Spanish-speaking countries produced multiple guides, or proposals of norms, focusing on how to eliminate sexism from the language, based on the characteristics and usages that result in discrimination against women (Bengoechea 2008: 37-40).

How could the Spanish language be sexist as it is? Inherent to the language are the facts that grammarians have traditionally been men, and that the language has developed under their constant prescriptivism (Heredero 2007: 79). The masculine grammatical gender is considered the unmarked, or default gender, which English speakers realize in creating fake-Spanish phrases like *el cheapo* (Harris 1991: 27-30). Its use is so generalized that if there is just one man in a group of women, you must use the masculine gender, a grammatical rule contributing to the invisibility of women (Heredero 2007: 82). Apart from the global use of the masculine gender, many professions are named exclusively in the masculine gender (*obispo* 'bishop,' *soldado* 'soldier'), and the feminization of these terms by replacing the gender morpheme encounters "a very strong social and academic resistance," even among university

students (Bengoechea 2008: 38, author's translation; Bengoechea and Simon 2014). Furthermore, the honorific terms *señor* 'Mr.', *señora* 'Mrs.', and *señorita* 'Miss' reveal that women are still identified in relation to men, an antiquity that has already been improved in English with the invention of the honorific 'Ms.' (Hord 2016: 18-20; Lakoff 1973: 68-69).

The opposing argument points out that, outside of linguistic sexism, *people* are those who employ sexist usages of language. To show the effects of grammatical gender on cognition, Bellacchi and Cubelli (2012) showed that at three years of age, children who had acquired a gendered language tended to internalize their conceptualizations of gender according to the distinctions their native language makes. Another study examined how adults who had never learned a grammatical system of morphological gender didn't reproduce the same internalization or mental entrenchment after acquiring a language with genders (Kurinski and Sera 2011). These two sets of results serve to contextualize the experimentation of Boroditsky et al. (2003), which identified strong patterns about the tendency to perceive categorically due to the influence of grammatical gender. With this background, the logic of feminist activists is summarized in a study by Prewitt-Freilino, Caswell and Laakso (2012), which found that in countries primarily speaking languages with grammatical gender, there is more inequality between men and women than in countries primarily speaking languages lacking grammatical gender. These conclusions stem from data retrieved from the Global Gender Gap Report, which determines their rankings based on criteria about the inclusion of women in the economy, politics, education, etc. (Prewitt-Freilino et al. 2012: 276). These studies don't account for the role that culture plays, but they indicate that there exists a certain difference in the cognition of speakers that think about gender more because of the constraints of their language.

Because of this, feminist activists call into question why a linguistic system that contributes to discrimination against women has been sustained. Since the 1980s, multiple guides proposing forms of anti-sexist language to employ have been published (Lomotey 2011). These proposals have critiqued pairs of words with sexist,

mismatched definitions (*el gobernante* ‘one who governs’, *la gobernanta* ‘housekeeper’), the use of the masculine generic that renders women invisible, unequal pairs of names for professions (*el alcalde*, *la alcaldesa* ‘mayor’), and other androcentric characteristics of the language’s lexicon and semantics (Heredero 2007: 79-82; Nissen 2013: 99-103). The reforms that have been proposed are described in Table 2.3.

TABLE 2.3: BENGOCHEA AND SIMÓN 2014; LOMOTÉY 2011

PROPOSALS REJECTED BY RAE	EXAMPLES
dual forms	<i>compañeros y compañeras</i> ‘comrades’ <i>padres y madres</i> ‘parents’
abstract forms without personal reference	<i>el alumnado</i> ‘alumni,’ <i>la ciudadanía</i> ‘citizenry,’ <i>el profesorado</i> ‘teaching staff’
dual articles	<i>los y las estudiantes</i> ‘students,’ <i>las y los ciudadanos</i> ‘citizens’
feminization of occupation titles	<i>soldada</i> ‘soldier,’ <i>caba</i> ‘corporal,’ <i>cancillera</i> ‘chancellor’
@ (the ‘at’ sign)	<i>amig@s</i> ‘friends,’ <i>latin@</i> ‘Latin,’ <i>alumn@s</i> ‘alumni’
redefinition of mismatches in meaning	<i>zorro</i> ‘fox’ and <i>zorra</i> ‘whore’ <i>gobernante</i> ‘leader’ and <i>gobernanta</i> ‘housekeeper’

The *Real Academia Española* (RAE), or Royal Spanish Academy, is the all-powerful institution in charge of “cleaning, fixing, and giving splendor to the language” while promoting “the proper usage...of a language in permanent evolution” (RAE 2015, author’s translation). Of the 46 current academic members, eight are women and the rest are men (RAE 2018). The RAE is the principal opposition to feminist reforms of language; the Academy rejects all of the proposals seen in Table 2.3 (Bengoechea 2008: 37-68). Ignacio Bosque (2012, author’s translation), RAE academic since 1997, is against how “the criterium to decide if linguistic sexism exists or not is the social conscience of women,” because their proposals “contradict...various normative grammars.” Even Paz Battaner, the woman most recently elected to the RAE in 2017, reveals that the topic doesn’t seem important to her. She is in agreement with Bosque’s essay, and believes firmly in the use of the masculine generic, adding “the *Dictionary [of the RAE]* should describe how people use words. It goes no further. There are people that this hurts...” (Mantilla



2017, author's translation). The people she's talking about, whose words and thoughts become entries in the dictionary, are white males, and the "people that this hurts" are ironically women, and any other non-male person.

Perhaps an observation not made by these two members of the RAE is that language is dynamic and changes only democratically through the majority adoption of new forms, and all languages resist external control (Lemus 2001: 202, Labov 2001). But aside from the institutional resistance by language academies, there are a few robust sociolinguistic studies based in university settings that indicate that young women have an astute consciousness about sexist Spanish forms, and about how to reduce sexism from the language by referring to themselves (Jiménez Rodrigo et al. 2011).

### 2.3. Innovations by Genderqueer Speakers

*"It's a vicious circle: the language is sexist because the society has been, and the society is sexist because the language is"* (García Meseguer 1976)

The necessity of having adequate innovations to represent any human gender is exemplified by the queer and genderqueer communities. The societal relations between bodies and power are reflected in colloquial language, and seeing as the language sometimes doesn't agree with human reality, many people have subverted the binary of morphological gender. One look at the internet shows various innovations that expand the Spanish language. Some only elude gender marking in writing, and some provide viable solutions that can be used in all parts of the language. These innovations can be grouped into three categories: non-innovations, those that intend to remove grammatical gender, and those that add another one (see Table 2.4).

TABLE 2.4: BENGOCHEA 2008; DEONIS 2017; LARA ICAZA 2014; MALDONADO 2017; GROUP ANARQUISTA PIREXIA 2011

EMPHASIZE GRAMMATICAL GENDER	segundo, da <i>second</i>	estimado/a amigo/a <i>esteemed friend</i>	querid@s alumn@s <i>dear scholar</i>	escritor, -ra <i>writer</i>	médico/a <i>doctor</i>	
REMOVE GRAMMATICAL GENDER	lxs trabajadorxs <i>workers</i>	voluntari*s <i>volunteers</i>	chicanx <i>Chicano</i>	amigx <i>friend</i>	latinx <i>Latin</i>	
ADD A NEW GRAMMATICAL GENDER	elle <i>they</i>	humanis <i>humans</i>	cansade <i>tired</i>	li personi <i>the person</i>	une persone <i>a person</i>	muchas amigas <i>many friends</i>

### 2.3.1. The 'At' Sign and Friends – @ - /

Juana María Rodríguez, professor at the University of California, Berkeley, didn't hesitate in pronouncing the word *latin@* during the NPR program *Latino USA*, hosted by María Hinojosa: "latin-ow" (Hinojosa 2016). Others didn't have as much luck: "Latin-at? Latin-at sign?". Professor Rodríguez remembered seeing the word for the first time on the internet, in LGBT forums during the 1990s. From then on, forms like *amig@s* ('friends') and *compañer@s* ('companions') have appeared in writing, but with lesser frequency are they ever pronounced (Hinojosa 2016). Similar methods include using a dash (*amigo, -a, compañeros, -as*) or a slash (*amigo/a, compañeros/as*). None of these forms constitute a valid innovation capable of representing another gender besides the masculine or the feminine—they're a combination of the o and the a, and they reinforce the same binary of morphological gender. (Bengoechea 2008: 51-57).

### 2.3.2. Remove Grammatical Gender – X

Garazi Lara Icaza (2014), Spanish artist and graduate of fine arts, investigated the intersection of bodies, language, and power from a transfeminist<sup>1</sup> perspective. Their<sup>2</sup> Master's thesis is a hybrid—part linguistic exploration based in queer and trans theory, and part subversive platform that allows them to shed light on genres of art and theory disobedient toward patriarchy and to introduce those into the academic realm. Societies depend on patriarchy and the value of reproduction to subjugate other people. Queer theory surged into the European Union in the early 1990s to go beyond normative feminism, but it has only tried to assimilate to patriarchal institutions, like the RAE. The lack of representation of non-conforming people subverting the hierarchies of gender and human biology influenced Lara Icaza to construct their *Proposición X*: the "use of -x to replace any grammatical marker with... personal reference," and moreover, "adapt the mechanics of non-sexualized writing to the institutional context" (Lara Icaza 2014: 69-70, author's translation). Citing Judith Butler, Lara Icaza is loyal to the concept that "the redefining of language requires

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<sup>1</sup> Transfeminism: feminism according to the needs of the trans community

<sup>2</sup> The author describes themselves in Spanish with the -x morpheme, so I've elected to use 'they'.

opening new contexts...new and future forms of legitimation" (Butler 2004: 73, cited in Lara Icaza 2014: 69, author's translation). Lara Icaza walks the boundary "inside-outside of academia" to give legitimacy and at the same time question how the university contributes to oppression in society (Lara Icaza 2014, author's translation). Rejecting gender by crossing out personal references to human gender with an x is a powerful concept, but perhaps it hasn't resolved the difficulty of speech.

Professor Juana María Rodríguez says that the x can be considered a rejection of the gender binary, or a complete rejection of the concept of gender (Hinojosa 2016). Following from this logic, if there aren't grammatical genders in the language, then it's not necessary to think about human biology, and every human would be classified equally. There is also the advantage of deemphasizing gender and human biology, which could invite a reordering of societal stratifications. Garazi Lara Icaza (2014) enumerates that the "trans x" is an artistic extension of transfeminism. It not only has the connotation of "inflicting violence on the language," but at the same time, it fuses the idea of there being more than two genders with the removal of gender entirely (Lara Icaza 2014, author's translation). Those against the use of the x critique that the revision seems anglocentric, given that the sound [ks] isn't included in descriptions of standard Spanish phonetics unless because of English borrowings (deOnís 2017). The other more serious disadvantage is that the x can't be pronounced fluently, and it almost can't be pronounced at all in phrases like *lxs niñxs*.

### 2.3.3. Add Another One – elle, -e, -i

TABLE 2.5: GARCÍA MESEGUER 1976

les españoles		hijos
	muches	
une	lingüístes	
querides amigas		
	otres	
polítiques		

Álvaro García Meseguer, a Spanish engineer, was recognized by the feminist movement in Madrid just after publishing his article "Sexism and Language" in 1976 (see Table 2.5). He didn't mention the feminist movement, nor did he refer to the concept of there being more than two human genders, but he had a radical proposal: "We need a new grammatical sign that corresponds with *person*... a simple solution

consists in assigning the suffix -e to the common gender, that is, to the *person*" (García Meseguer 1976, author's translation). Explaining that Spanish requires a profound transformation alongside a cultural revolution, he argues that the masculine gender should be reduced as much as the feminine to combat the invisibility of women. His "linguistic engineering" to reduce sexism became the perfect avenue for the queer and trans movement (García Meseguer 1976, author's translation). This advantage was illuminated in an article dialoging with García Meseguer's proposal, comparing it against linguistic change in Sweden (Sarmiento Salinas 2015). Sarmiento Salinas outlines how the Swedish language had similar uses of the masculine generic, even though there is no nominal gender inflection, but the adoption of the gender-neutral pronoun *hen* in 2015 by the Swedish Academy helped to diminish its usage. His "revitalization" of García Meseguer's proposal forms part of a list of three alternatives to avoid the masculine generic, including the doubling of nouns in both genders, and the elimination of sexist forms (Sarmiento Salinas 2015). But even though the adoption of a new pronoun by the Swedish Academy signals that something similar could happen in Spanish, the case of Sweden is a rarity.

García Meseguer's proposal (1976) to introduce a common gender to represent 'person,' with forms in -e, and to make it the default form, has remained a popular idea. Organic usages of forms in -e have been attested by genderqueer speakers in publications like *Remezcla* and *El País* (Maldonado 2017; Remezcla 2018). Phonetically, the choice of the vowel /e/ isn't out of place: of the five most prototypical vowels seen in global varieties of Spanish, /e/ forms a triangle inside of the vowel space that measures equal distance between the vowels /e, o, a/ (Penny 2002: 55-56). This morphemic invention has been expounded on and modified by linguists, activists, and even people without advanced knowledge about the topic. Perhaps you've seen the viral video of a young girl from Argentina defending her gender-neutral forms of language: "The teacher tells me that *todes* doesn't exist... trans people don't identify with *todos* and *todas*" (Remezcla 2018, author's translation). Additionally, the popularization of the pronoun *elle* completes the paradigm in -e to make the proposal linguistically functional (Diz Pico 2017).

The anarchist group *Pirexia* supported the adoption of a fourth grammatical gender in -e to represent 'human' in 2011; their proposal, similar to Lara Icaza's (2014), intended to abolish assignments of masculine and feminine gender in personal reference. The group highlights their belief in the necessity of having a truly neuter gender: "For us, the biological sex of a person doesn't reduce simply into two categories (masculine and feminine), for us it's a melting pot that's difficult to define" (Grupo Anarquista Pirexia 2011, author's translation). Jorge Diz Pico, a computational linguist from Spain, lauded the utility of using such a gender in translations; in an interview, he proposed that it resolves the problem of assigning gender when translating from English to Spanish (Maldonado 2017). His article "Elle que elle" supports the adoption of the pronoun and invites a simplification of our understanding of human gender: "an explicitly neuter gender wouldn't only permit people... to be able to express themselves and be expressed; but it would also bit by bit erase connotations about gender roles that we're inevitably doing away with" (Diz Pico 2017, author's translation).

An almost identical proposal was introduced in 2011 by American programmer Richard Stallman, who wanted to employ the vowel /i/ (*elli, li, usuari*) (Stallman 2011, cited in Lara Icaza 2014). Even though these are similar solutions, forms in /e/ have been attested more than forms in /i/.

As of now, the most descriptive investigation about how linguistics and queer and trans theory interact was performed by Levi Hord (2016), an academic who interviewed 182 genderqueer English speakers<sup>3</sup> (including 31 participants bilingual in English and French, English and Swedish, and English and German) to see which linguistic forms are being used, and to detail their attitudes about the ability to identify themselves in each language, and any difficulties in doing so. The experimenter's questions were based on the genderqueer experience; they reflect the importance of having inclusive forms, given that genderqueer people face discomfort and violence from being misgendered. Hord cites numerous genderqueer

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<sup>3</sup> The participants identified themselves as "non-binary, agender, gender fluid, genderqueer, transgender, polygender, male, female, questioning, two-spirited, bigender, demi-agender, non-binary transmasculine," and some participants identified themselves with multiple terms (Hord 2016: 15-16).

and trans authors and activists like Leslie Feinberg, known for *zir*<sup>4</sup> self-identification with the gender-neutral English pronoun *ze*, Susan Stryker, a founding academic of transgender studies, and Pauline Park, another binary trans woman that defended the retention of binary forms in addition to new non-binary forms. Hord performed the sociolinguistic interviews in order to contribute to trans visibility, and to raise awareness about “linguistic activism,” which recognizes the necessity of having forms in each language capable of expressing other identities besides masculine and feminine (Hord 2016).

The study distinguishes between gender-neutral forms and forms expressive of other genders that haven’t yet been invented in the majority of languages, and it points out that these two categories are both highly stigmatized in relation to queerness. The English and Swedish speakers said that the extant terms in their languages allowed them to self-identify adequately, especially due to the gender-neutral pronouns ‘they’ in English, and *hen* in Swedish. The French and German speakers responded that there was far less possibility for genderqueer “linguistic subversion” in their languages because of the lack of a consensus about gender neutral innovations. The German speakers didn’t know of any pronominal innovations, nor any morphological innovations. Each French speaker knew of a pronoun, though they were all different, e.g. *ille/luille/cille* (Hord 2016).

These discoveries reveal that even in languages spoken in highly modernized societies, there is very little consciousness surrounding genderqueer communities and how to refer to people without assigning a gender. Feminist activism has succeeded in increasing the presence of women in everyday Spanish by creating a consciousness around the invisibility of the female voice, and by expanding the feminine grammatical gender. Genderqueer people don’t have a grammatical gender to expand, and for that reason, many have subverted the language.

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<sup>4</sup> The *ze* pronoun paradigms in English are *ze/hir/hirself* and *ze/zir/zirself*.

### 3. Methodology

In order to investigate which innovations can be attested in the Spanish of genderqueer speakers, 11 informants participated in an experiment designed to elicit productions of forms that subvert the language's system of morphological gender. The only requirements to participate as an informant were to be at least 18 years old, agree to be recorded, and to either identify as genderqueer, or speak Spanish in a way that accommodates for those who are. It was explicitly understood that all identifying information about the participants would be maintained private. This methodology was inspired by the works of Boroditsky et al. (2003), Hord (2016), and Lara Icaza (2014). Approval was received by the Institutional Research Board (IRB) at UC Berkeley on October 30, 2018.

#### 3.1. Materials

The interviews were conducted from Berkeley, some in person and others through FaceTime. The informants were recorded using Voice Notes on an iPhone X and the quotes that were included were transcribed using a MacBook Pro. The participants were solicited by means of a personal letter by the researcher<sup>5</sup> posted to Facebook and included in the Multicultural Community Center (MCC) newsletter. Following the advice provided by Hord (2016), I chose to include my own self-identifications of gender and sexuality in order to explain who I am and my intentions in studying this topic. This was meant to diminish any the doubts the informants had, and also so that they would know the purpose of their participation.

#### 3.2. Participants

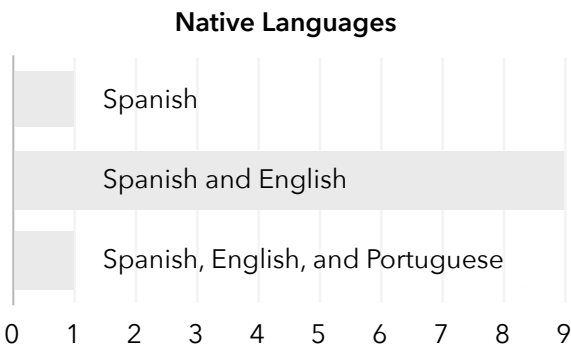
Information about the 11 participants can be seen in Table 3.1., which includes their self-identifications, ages, places of origin, native languages, parents' place of origin, and their responses to the question "What do you do?".

Eight of the informants are from the United States, two are from Spain, and one is from Peru. Their ages range from 19 to 24. All of the informants are bilingual native speakers of Spanish and English, except for one trilingual and one native speaker of

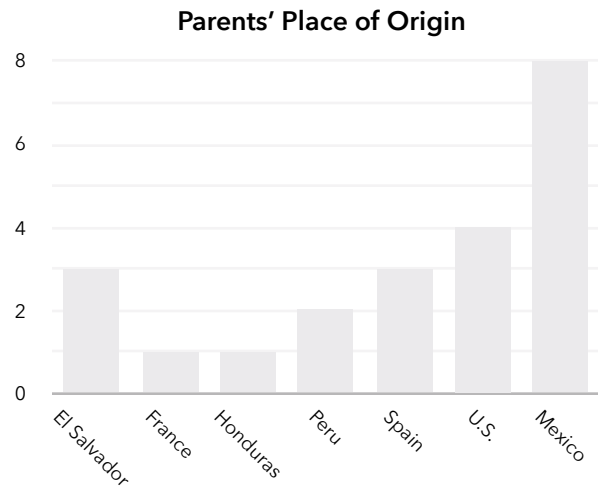
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<sup>5</sup> See Appendix A.

Self-Identification	
queer cis female	queer and genderqueer
bisexual transboy	straight woman
queer and asexual	queer
∅	nonbinary
non-binary transman	queer woman
bisexual woman	



Age				
19	21			
19	21	22	23	
19	21	22	23	24



- What do you do?**
- student (9)
  - graduate with two Master's degrees
  - academic advisor
  - I want to go to law school (2)
  - I break barriers
  - I'm a daughter
  - worker
  - paralegal
  - poet
  - I read
  - I grow
  - supervisor in my job
  - organizer (3)
  - activist (2)
  - legal assistant (3)
  - volunteer translator
  - I'm writing a thesis
  - I want to be a high school English teacher



only Spanish. They are all now bilingual in Spanish and English.

### 3.3. Experiment

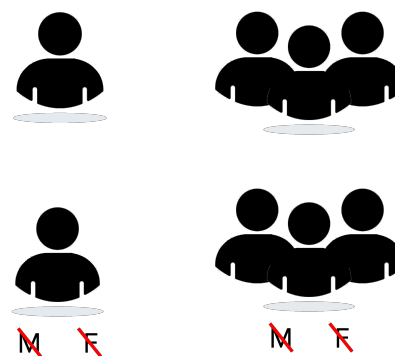
First, it was confirmed that the participants were at least 18 years of age, and that they agreed to be recorded. They were then told that they could give a few words to self-identify their gender or sexuality, but that they did not have to do so.

In the first task<sup>6</sup>, a casual interview was conducted in order to obtain information about the informants and to elicit semi-spontaneous productions of personally-gendering forms. Initial biographical questions noted their age, their place of origin, and a few facts about their family background. The questions that followed asked about their native languages and levels of competency in the languages they speak. This linguistic profile was supplemented by metalinguistic comments about their abilities to express and identify themselves in their languages, with a question about how those languages represent non-normative people.

The second task consisted of a linguistic experiment designed to elicit innovations to the system of morphological gender in Spanish. The visual stimuli<sup>7</sup>, presented on five-by-seven inch index cards, differed according to their depictions of a subject, with two factors separated on two levels: grammatical number (singular and plural), and the representation of their gender. Two stimuli were intended to represent gender ambiguity, and the other two were marked by an indication that the subject does not identify as masculine nor feminine (see Table 3.2).

These four subject depictions were paired randomly with one of four actions, also represented visually: going to the store, running, sleeping, or shaving. Out of 16 possible cards, four were selected for each participant, with one card for each possible subject depiction. After seeing every visual stimulus of subject plus action, they were given the same three

TABLE 3.2: DEPICTIONS OF SUBJECTS



<sup>6</sup> See Appendix B.

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix C.

modules, given and responded to verbally:

1. Describe what's happening, in Spanish.
2. How would you say that they're "tall and blonde," in Spanish?
3. How would you describe their gender, in Spanish?

Each module was designed to explore a different aspect of gender in the Spanish language. By asking the questions in English, a language without gender, this allowed for the informants' open interpretations of grammatical gender when responding in Spanish, not only in nominal and pronominal attribution (Module 1), but in the attribution of gender morphology when translating the adjectives from English to Spanish (Module 2). An explicit comment about their conceptualization of the gender of the subject depiction was also elicited (Module 3). In the "blonde and tall" module, for the two subject depictions marked neither male nor female, participants were instructed that they could not give a response in *o* or *a*, nor could they give an evasive response that avoided the assignment of a grammatical gender, even if this meant innovating.





The third task was a debriefing interview in which participants were asked about specific topics. These questions detailed attitudes about the masculine gender being used to represent non-male people, and about all of the innovative forms they either did or did not produce in the other two tasks (@, x, e, i). These attitudes were then compared to the informants' productions of gendered responses in those tasks, in which they were not provoked to produce any particular grammatical gender per the design of the experiment.

#### **4. Results**

The responses to the first module, in which the participants were asked to "Describe what's happening, in Spanish," are described in Table 4.1. The data indicates that the majority variant was a response that didn't directly assign a grammatical gender to the subject (frequency of 59% overall). These forms include sentences without a pronoun, in which the grammatical identification of 'person' is limited to 'third person'. Other evasive forms that were seen include words like

'person' and 'group'. Apart from responses without explicit personal gendered reference, the variant that occurred with the most frequency was the use of the masculine grammatical gender (average of 23%). In contrast, there were no responses in the feminine grammatical gender, which signals that no participant conceptualized the subject depictions as female upon initial reaction. There was also no response ending in the morpheme -i. The frequency of innovative forms (e, x, i) among all of the subject attributions was 18%.

TABLE 4.1: PERCENTAGES OF RESPONSES TO THE 1<sup>ST</sup> TASK – ATTRIBUTION OF FORM OF REFERENCE

				
Response without explicit reference (lack of pronoun, <i>la persona, el grupo</i> )	54.55%	45.45%	72.72%	63.6%
Masculine response* ( <i>él, ellos, el hombre, los hombres</i> )	45.45%	45.45%	0%	0%
Response in e ( <i>elle, elles</i> )	0%	9.1%	18.18%	27.3%
Response in x ( <i>ellx, ellxs</i> )	0%	0%	9.1%	9.1%
Response in i ( <i>elli, ellis</i> )	0%	0%	0%	0%
Feminine response† ( <i>ella, ellas, la mujer, las mujeres</i> )	0%	0%	0%	0%

\*form considered default †anti-sexist form

The results of the second task, in which participants were asked "How would you say that they're 'tall and blonde,' in Spanish?" are grouped into the same six categories: responses in the morphemes -o, -a, -e, -x, -i, and responses that avoided a gender identification of the subject, as in 'the person has blonde hair' (see Table 4.2). The forms that referred to subjects using the masculine grammatical gender occurred at a frequency of 45%, where allowed. With the first two subject depictions, responses without explicit personal gendered reference occurred with lesser frequency than in the first module, 41% in total. These subjects were only referenced using innovative morphological forms 9% of the time; feminine forms were produced in 5% of trials. With the last two subjects, when participants were instructed to innovate, the forms

most attested by the informants were of the paradigm in e (71%); the only other forms attested were of the paradigm in x (29%).

TABLE 4.2: PERCENTAGES OF RESPONSES TO THE 2<sup>ND</sup> TASK – ATTRIBUTION OF ADJECTIVAL MORPHOLOGY

				
Response in o* e.g. <i>rubio(s) y alto(s)</i>	45.45%	45.45%	-	-
Response in a† e.g. <i>rubia(s) y alta(s)</i>	9.1%	0%	-	-
Response in e e.g. <i>rubie(s) y alte(s)</i>	0%	9.09%	54.55%	54.55%
Response in x e.g. <i>rubix(s) y altx(s)</i>	0%	9.09%	45.45%	36.36%
Response in i e.g. <i>rubí(s) y alti(s)</i>	0%	0%	0%	9.09%
Response without explicit reference e.g. <i>la persona tiene pelo rubio, el grupo</i>	45.45%	36.36%	-	-

\*form considered default †anti-sexist form

The responses to the third module, which asked participants “How would you describe their gender, in Spanish?,” either emulated their productions in the other two modules, or they said something from which a conceptualization of gender could not be established; these responses included *no se conoce* ‘It’s unknown’ and *no hay género* ‘There is no gender’.

The attitudes that were documented in the third task, in conjunction with the attitudes and gendered forms produced in the first task, are best represented by the words of the participants themselves (see Table 4.3). The biographical information and metalinguistic comments collected in the initial task were compared with the participants’ later attitudes in order to see if any pattern in their responses could be detected. Most commonly, among all participants, an articulate understanding of patriarchy and the androcentric traits of language did not prevent the tendency to react to even unmarked subject depictions as masculine. Additionally, opinions about the innovations in x were different between those of Spanish and Mexican backgrounds,

TABLE 4.3: WHAT THE PARTICIPANTS HAD TO SAY – RESPONSES IN TASKS 1 AND 3

**About the masculine generic:**

"There's a lack of respect. There is less harm in not assuming and allowing people to speak for themselves."

"That's something that happens because we live in a patriarchal society, and the neuter is leveled with the masculine. Everything is masculine by default."

"I think it's not only a fault of the system of the Spanish language, but also of the community. We understand and recognize non-binary people, but we're not taking action to include them in our language."

"There are people that use the example of Latin to say no, it's not male-centric, it's that the o comes from Latin. But centuries have passed since Latin."

**About the differences between Spanish and English:**

"Spanish is so gendered between one or the other...this is because people that speak Spanish tend to be very religious...the language has a lot to do with religion, with *machismo*."

"Sometimes people don't have access to this language and it can be a very privileged place to use they/them pronouns."

"In Mexico, most of the language to describe gays is from English."

**About the use of the feminine gender:**

"It's annoying because everything is based off of the male identity...it's acceptable for everyone to be grouped as male, but not as female... then people get offended suddenly."

**About the 'at' sign (@):**

"I think that was a good transition, but it still just focused on the binary. You're still meaning to make it a gender."

**About the x:**

"The x crosses out and defies gender...it's a way to decolonize the language."

"In Spanish popular culture, all around, the x is being used...It's that it can't be pronounced."

"The x means inclusivity...it's almost unheard of outside of the bubble."

"I think it means something new...The x reminds me of native languages."

"I don't like it, it seems like something that only chicanos in the United States use."

"I don't think that people are ready to let go of the o or the a because it's a huge part of Latin culture. The x is very much a second and third generation thing of Latinos in the U.S. People within Latin America might feel that Latinos in the U.S. are changing what's theirs."

**About elle and the e:**

"I like it because it feels natural, it feels like something easy to say and easy to adapt. I see it used in queer communities online."

"I don't believe that anyone understands. The majority of people don't know what genderqueer is...They say gay, hetero, and that's it. Bisexuality doesn't exist..."

"Even though grammatically it's a little awkward, I think it's necessary. Although it may take a while, it's time to change the language."

"The only people who are aware of that are people who are genderqueer."

as reflected in comments that the use of forms in x was widespread in Spanish popular culture, while people in Latin America find the x to bear American influence.

## 5. Discussion

The results of the subject attribution task (Module 1) showed that participants successfully avoided gendering the subject directly in 59% of responses. The participants reacted to the subjects as masculine in 23% of responses; there were no initial reactions to the subjects as female. Innovative forms were produced unprovoked at a rate of 18% among all responses.

The results of the adjectival morphology assignment task (Module 2) showed that when not explicitly told the gender of the subject, there was still a strong tendency to classify generic-seeming subjects as male; this occurred at a rate of 45%, where allowed. There was also a strong tendency to avoid gendering the subject directly by attributing adjectives to the words 'person' or 'group,' a variant seen at a frequency of 41%, where allowed. When not forced to innovate, participants only produced innovative forms 9% of the time. However, when explicitly told to innovate, participants attested innovations in the e paradigm 71% of the time, and innovations in the x paradigm 29% of the time.

The influence of the masculine generic in Spanish is clearly perceptible; in many trials, participants either reacted to the depiction of the subject (intended to be ambiguous) using masculine gender morphology, or by explicitly calling the subject a man. Even participants who articulated disdain for the masculine generic in their interviews were not immune from reacting with categorical perception of gender. Some participants stated that the image used looked like a man, and this sentiment evokes consideration about what a non-gender specific person looks like.

There was also a strong tendency to give a response which successfully avoided gendering the subjects directly. One participant explained how they understood this tendency by stating that it's better not to assume the gender of people they don't know, and that everyone should have an opportunity to identify themselves. Though it is possible that some participants were aware of the

implications of their answers in the tasks, many exhibited an effort to avoid attributing a gender directly to the subject, whether this was conscious or not. This trend could be influenced by the identities of the participants.

The innovation attested the most by participants in all trials was the paradigm in e, occurring at a frequency of 22%. It's interesting to note that there was never any confusion or disagreement among the informants about how to inflect the pronouns or gender morphology with the morpheme -e; every adjectival response in e was pronounced the same way. The set of innovations in x occurred only slightly less frequently, at a rate of 14% overall. The participants had differing ways of producing pronouns in the morpheme -x, and some used a plural-appearing form to represent both the singular and plural subjects. The adjectival responses in x varied in their pronunciations.

The innovations attested include the pronouns *elle(s)*, *ellx(s)*, and *elli(s)*. Through the adjectival attribution task, the participants also attested forms in the e paradigm (*le persone, rubie, alte*), the x paradigm (*guarx, altex*), and the i paradigm (*uni personi rubi*). The innovative pronoun *ellx(s)* was not found to be attested in the review of prior literature.

Throughout the entire experimentation, only one participant chose not to give a voluntary self-identification. This was the only instance of a prompt left unanswered. Every informant was very forthcoming and reflective in their responses, sometimes even elaborating on their answers unprovoked. This high rate of response was not expected, as discussing personal information can be a point of sensitivity for queer and genderqueer communities. There was a noticeable ease and lack of hesitation with all participants; the quality of the responses may have been influenced by the researcher's openly queer identity being shared with the informants before they participated.

## **6. Conclusion**

Among all trials, the participants elected not to directly gender the subjects 39% of the time. However, they reacted to the subjects as male 23% of the time. This

signifies that even people who have a complicated relationship with grammatical gender and their own gender identity are not immune to generalizing people as males by default. Both of these variants occurred more frequently than any actual innovation to morphological gender in Spanish; the paradigm in e occurred with an overall frequency of 22%, followed by the paradigm in x, which occurred with a frequency of 14% in all trials. When participants were forced to innovate, they sometimes produced a particular innovation more than any of the other forms for each subject, but if asked to assign gender morphology without any other instructions, it's indicated that none of the innovations have diffused significantly in reference to 'normal'-appearing subjects, or subjects that do not bear an explicit label of gender identity. Forms in the feminine grammatical gender, considered the forms that could have been employed to combat sexism in Spanish, occurred only as much as the least frequent innovative variant i, both occurring at a rate of only 1% each.

These trials were limited by the sample size of the participant group. While genderqueer people form a significant percentage of the human population, their access to gender-expressive forms of speech varies dramatically by language, and their accessibility and proximity to research about genderqueer language is also constrained by social factors. Future experimentation investigating innovations by genderqueer speakers must be conducted in order to better assess the variation in and the extent of their usages. One question for further research on the topic is: How do you study sociolinguistic variation without a gender binary? Without the typical Labovian exemplar of women being the predominant innovators of language, it's more difficult to discern which idiosyncratic traits or societal influences are responsible for differing familiarity with innovative forms of language.

The most important question this thesis addresses has to do with the importance of the visibility of genderqueer people. How do we support innovations in any language that allow people to better express their identities? In reference to Garazi Lara Icaza (2014), these forms must be made visible. In order to gain societal understanding, they must come to form part of institutions of prescriptive language, like universities and government offices, where they may be afforded legitimacy through their publication, and their significance may be discussed outside of the



communities which created them. While a consciousness about the workings of gender in language is not as prevalent in all language speakers, there should apply a fundamental rule of linguistic respect whereby people are referenced as they wish to be referenced. This thesis seeks to contribute to sociolinguistic descriptions of innovations to Spanish made by genderqueer speakers, with the hope that the participants' sentiments and linguistic forms may be afforded legitimacy and visibility by the university context in which they are placed.

## **7. Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my faculty advisor, Dr. Justin Davidson, Ph.D., who guided me through this project that I've been very passionate about with brilliant direction and constant advice. I am very grateful for Dr. Davidson's support of this research.

I'd like to thank my family for affording me the opportunity to pursue a university education, and for being my biggest cheerleaders. Thank you also to my friends for encouraging me by believing in my ability to do this work.

Finally, I'd like to thank the informants I had the pleasure of speaking with through this research. Thank you for sharing your identities and stories with me; I hope that this thesis does you and your communities justice.

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## 9. Appendix

### 9.1. Appendix A: Pre-Interview Introduction

Morphological Gender Innovations in Spanish of Genderqueer Speakers

Student Researcher: Benjamin Papadopoulos, B.A.

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Justin Davidson, Ph.D.

UC Berkeley, Department of Spanish and Portuguese

About Me: I'm a fourth year double-major at UC Berkeley. I study linguistics, or language science, and Spanish, with an emphasis on linguistics. I identify as a queer, cisgendered white male. I'm 22 years old. Many of the people in my life are native Spanish speakers. My friends and I often discuss the fact that Spanish forces us to mandatorily identify people as 'masculine' or 'feminine,' and that Spanish cannot represent people who have a different gender identity than 'male' or 'female'. I'm seeking to interview people who face this issue, either because they are genderqueer, or because they know people who are, and they employ the language their friends want used. I'm writing a senior thesis on this topic because not much has been written about it in linguistics. I'm very passionate about queer advocacy and linguistics, and I want to write a paper that can be of use to my communities.

Do you fit the description of who I aim to interview?

Thank you,

Benjamin Papadopoulos

## 9.2. Appendix B: Casual Interview Questions

### Biographical Questions:

- Where are you from? / Where did you grow up?
- What schools did you attend? / What kind of people did you see there?
- What cities did you live in? / What kind of people did you see in those places?
- What were your friends like? / How were they similar or dissimilar to you?
- What is your family like? / Are they like you, or not?
- Where do you live now? / Do you have roommates? / What would your ideal living situation be like?
- What do you want to do when you grow up? / Why?
- What types of food do you like? / What's your favorite food?
- How would you compare Berkeley with San Francisco?

### Questions about Language Background:

- What's your native language? / Did you grow up exposed to one or more languages?
- Do you have competence in another language? / Which languages?
- Do you use your languages in distinct settings/circumstances?
- Are there advantages related to using one language over another?
- Are there some topics that are easier to explain in one language over another?
- Are there things that you can't express well in one language or another?
- Does describing people result differently in one language over another?
- Does one language or another underline differences between people more?
- What are the biggest discrepancies between Spanish and English?
- How does Spanish handle describing people that don't follow social norms of gender and sexuality?
- How would you refer to those people?

9.3. Appendix C: Visual Stimuli

