



“El [gènere gramatical] no es pot correlacionar amb cap element extralingüístic”: una revisió de posicionamientos sobre el género en catalán desde la perspectiva de la lingüística *queer* y trans*

“[Grammatical gender] cannot be correlated with any extralinguistic element”: reviewing positions on gender in Catalan from the perspective of Queer and Trans Linguistics

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Resumen: En catalán, español y otras lenguas románicas, el género gramatical está hasta cierto punto ligado a la identidad de género, puesto que empleamos el masculino cuando nos referimos a hombres («el professorØ està cansatØ»), y el femenino cuando nos referimos a mujeres («la professora està cansada»). El objetivo de este artículo es analizar las posturas de una corriente de la lingüística catalana y de las instituciones normativas del catalán sobre la relación entre género lingüístico y extralingüístico, para lo cual estableceremos un corpus *ad hoc* de textos sobre este tema que después analizaremos críticamente desde la perspectiva de la lingüística *queer* y trans. Tras el análisis, aduciremos que los desafíos a la norma muestran la necesidad de un cambio en las perspectivas tradicionales.

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Palabras clave: catalán; lingüística *queer* y trans; género lingüístico y extralingüístico; género gramatical; lenguaje no binario

Abstract: In Catalan, Spanish and other Romance languages, grammatical gender is conventionally tied to gender identity, since the masculine is used when referring to men ('el professorØ està cansatØ'), while the feminine is used when referring to women ('la professora està cansada'). My aim in this paper is to analyze the Catalan normative institutions and some Catalan linguists' stance on the relationship between linguistic and extralinguistic gender. To achieve this, I will build an *ad hoc* corpus of texts about this topic and subsequently analyze them from the perspective of Queer and Trans Linguistics. To conclude, I will make the point that existing challenges to the norm imply a need for a shift in these perspectives.

Keywords: Catalan; queer and trans linguistics; extralinguistic and linguistic gender; grammatical gender; non-binary language

INTRODUCTION

Linguistic gender is a trait present in many languages of the world that classifies nominal entities in different categories or classes. In Catalan and other Romance languages, for example, grammatical gender is binary (masculine/feminine) and is a trait present in nominal categories encoded in morphemes that intrinsically have this trait. Thus *cama* ('leg') is feminine, while *ull* ('eye') is masculine. For Catalan nouns, this division is semantically arbitrary but formally marked by gender morphemes, usually Ø for the masculine and /a/ for the feminine¹.

This system, however, is just one of many possibilities, since other languages may not have a nominal gender system at all (English), or may have three genders (German, Latin) or more than three (Bantu languages), or may have a binary linguistic gender system that divides into animate and non-animate entities (Basque), among many others.

Focusing on Catalan, the masculine-feminine system (equivalent to the system present in Spanish, Galician, Portuguese, French, Italian...) can be seen as just a means of classifying nominal words into two arbitrary groups, since, in principle, there is no semantic motivation by which one word should pertain to one group or the other. However, when referring to humans, the classification ceases to be arbitrary up to a point, meaning the feminine gender and the masculine gender are traditionally used to talk about and tied to women and men, respectively:

¹ Other noun groups have different marks. For a review of these, cf. IEC (2016: § 7.2.1.3) and/or Clua (2002: § 2.2.2).

- (1) a. La fornera està cansada
[the.FEM.SG baker.FEM.SG is tired.FEM.SG]
- b. El forner està cansat
[the.MASC.SG baker.MASC.SG is tired.MASC.SG]

Just from the forms used in these sentences, one could infer that the baker in example (1a) is a woman, while the baker in (1b) is a man. Traditional descriptions of this phenomenon tend to naturalize this association between linguistic and extralinguistic gender or do not pay excessive attention to it, regarding it as something minor without much of an impact on grammar as a whole. However, from the perspective of Queer Linguistics, this association can be analyzed as something that reinforces and naturalizes extralinguistic gender as a social category.

In this paper, my aim is to review, analyze and critique the positions of a certain current among Catalan linguists and normative works regarding the specific uses of linguistic gender when referring to humans. To achieve this, I will establish a corpus composed of texts written by linguists (both academic and/or informational-educational), the normative grammars of Catalan and others, all of which cover the topic of linguistic gender and its relationship to humans.

These texts will then be analyzed from the perspective and contributions of Queer Theory, Queer Linguistics and Trans Linguistics, which make up my theoretical framework. Finally, I will briefly introduce the proposal for the creation of a new ‘neuter’ or non-binary linguistic gender in Catalan, arguing that it is an important tool for Catalan-speaking non-binary people to be able to talk about themselves and others in their native language without having to resort to strategies belonging to other languages such as Spanish or English.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK²

I will be using the framework of Queer and Trans Linguistics (Livia & Hall, 1997; Motschenbacher, 2010; Zimman, 2020). The first follows Butler’s (2006, 2009, 2011) theory of gender performativity and thus considers that language is performative itself: how we talk or how we are

² I must thank one of the reviewers for giving very pertinent and constructive suggestions and references in this section in particular but also throughout the whole paper.

talked to builds realities, social constructs upon which we build other, more complex ideas and constructs. This approach, thus, conceptualizes language “not as an abstract prerequisite [...], but [...] as the result of repeated linguistic performances that over time have led to the materialization of certain structural categories” (Motschenbacher, 2010: 61).

The second “regards transformation, fluidity, and movement as central aspects of both identity and language” in which “deterministic and homogenizing accounts of (non)normative social practice are approached with skepticism” but crucially “centers trans people and others who occupy the margins of normative categories, those who exceed them, and those who travel between them” (Zimman, 2020: 15).

In this sense, I will take root on considerations about linguistic gender, like Motschenbacher’s (2010) critical revision of the four divisions of gender construction as proposed by Hellinger & Bußmann (2001) (lexical, social, grammatical and referential). For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the specific uses of linguistic gender, not the generic ones; that is, the use of gender when there is a direct correspondence between grammatical, referential and extralinguistic gender, generally when referring to only one person without epicenes. Reusing example (1):

- (1) a. La fornera està cansada [when talking about a woman]
[the.FEM.SG baker.FEM.SG is tired.FEM.SG]
- b. El forner està cansat [when talking about a man]
[the.MASC.SG baker.MASC.SG is tired.MASC.SG]

Generic uses imply the ‘discordance’ between grammatical and referential gender, generally—but not exclusively—when referring to a group of people. Traditionally, these uses have been tied to the masculine, whether in singular with a universal value or in plural with the so-called ‘generic masculine.’ Borderline cases like epicenes and collective nouns, whose grammatical gender is systematically independent from referential gender, are also included here for the sake of simplicity:

- (2) a. L’humà és resilient [singular with a universal value]
[the.MASC.SG human.MASC.SG is resilient.MASC.SG]

- b. Els forners estan cansats [generic masculine, plural]
[the.MASC.PL bakers.MASC.PL are tired.MASC.PL]
- c. Aquesta persona està cansada [epicene noun]
[This.FEM.SG person.FEM.SG is tired.FEM.SG]
- d. Tot l'estudiantat està cansat [collective noun]
[All.MASC.SG the.MASC.SG 'collective of
students'.MASC.SG is tired.MASC.SG]

It is worth noting that the difference between generic and specific uses are thus not marked with different forms, but the same form can be used in both cases depending on the context.

Two important references are Zimman's (2014, 2017) work on the interaction between body features and discourse interface, which shows that the general view on the relationship between body traits and language tends to be bioessentialist. Lastly, López's (2019, 2020, 2021) distinction on Direct vs Indirect Non-Binary Language for Spanish (applicable to Catalan and other Romance languages) will also come into play. The first refers to 'hiding' gendered uses of language, while the second implies creating new gender morphemes and lexemes that cannot be tied to the traditional gender binary.

2. METHODS

I will first establish a corpus of texts in Catalan that cover the topic of linguistic gender when referring to humans, which will be divided into two parts, one that covers an important current of authors with a marked position on this topic, and one with more 'neutral' texts.

Thus, the first group is made up of texts belonging to the Grup d'Estudi de Llengües Amençades (GELA) [Study Group of Endangered Languages] and others who share their view; this aims to be representative of an important current of Catalan linguists that have historically taken a marked position on the debate on gender-fair language, mainly arguing that social matters and language matters should be kept separated. Most of these texts are available on their website (https://www.gela.cat/doku.php?id=repensar_genere).

The second group is made up of texts from the current Catalan normative and descriptive grammars (Clua, 2002; AVL, 2006; IEC, 2016), some texts on the matter from the normative institutions (IEC, 2023), and some universities' recommendations on gender usage (Departament de Filologia Catalana i Lingüística General de la Universitat de les Illes Balears, 2009).

This selection contains both academic and communicational texts, which means that not all of them have a strict academic approach. This is because I aim to address some underlying assumptions about the sex/gender system, and, arguably, this can be observed more easily in generalist texts.

I will be doing a presuppositional analysis within the frame of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Van Dijk, 1998; Fairclough, 2018) to extract the underlying assumptions, ideas and positions on linguistic gender that these authors have. In this sense, I will tackle specifically presuppositions about the category of sex, the use of the deontic modality, the appeal to markedness theory, or the insistence on the separation of social and grammatical matters, among others.

After that, I will try to respond to some of these from the framework of poststructuralist Queer Linguistics and Trans Linguistics, as discussed in the previous section, arguing that many of the assumptions and arguments have already been put into question by these disciplines, and I will provide some counterarguments.

3. STATE OF THE ART: THE POSITIONS ON GENDER

Regarding linguistic gender when referring to humans in Catalan³, usually one of two positions is taken. On the one hand, there are those who start from the assumption that linguistic gender in Catalan is tied to the referent's sex when talking about humans, meaning feminine is used for females and masculine for males⁴:

The relationship between gender and sex is quite systematic in nouns referring to humans: *fill/filla* [son / daughter], *mestre/mestra* [teacher.MASC / teacher.FEM], *monjo/monja* [monk.MASC / nun.FEM], *europèu/europea*

³ From now on, all references to linguistic gender and/or grammar rules must be understood as referring to Catalan unless the contrary is stated.

⁴ Translations of quoted texts are my own, and any possible mistranslation should only be attributed to me.

[European.MASC / European.FEM]. There is an exception to this norm: a few nouns that can refer to either sex regardless of whether they are formally masculine or feminine. (IEC, 2016: 160)

Whenever a text refers to a specific person, the gender corresponding to that person's sex must be used. (Departament de Filologia Catalana i Lingüística General de la Universitat de les Illes Balears, 2009)

On the other hand, there are those who claim that linguistic gender and sex bear no relationship or that this relationship is too weak and therefore negligible. They usually justify this statement claiming that 1. not all languages present linguistic gender, nor does it work the same way in all of them, and 2. the number of words that vary in grammatical/lexical gender when referring to humans means just a small percentage of all the words that have the property of linguistic gender.

When speaking about gender, rather than being deictic or an element identifying the interlocutors, we are dealing with a grammatical element whose functioning is subject to rules that have nothing to do with biology. (Junyent, 2009: 8)

Sex is a biological property of living beings: each person (and some animals) has one of two, male or female. In the realm of language, the meaning of some words includes the denotation of the biological sex of their referent in the world, but by no means that of all words. (Roca, 2015: 2)

Even with the fact that some semantic load can be identified in some languages, (...) the truth is that a very high percentage of nouns in each category cannot be explained according to this criterion. (...) It can therefore be claimed that there is no correlation between gender and sex. (Grup d'Antropologia Lingüística, 2006: 20)

This is also the main argument of most authors in *Som dones, som lingüistes, som moltes i diem prou* (Junyent [coord.], 2021), a collection of some 20 texts on the matter of gender-fair language by women in academia or other language-related disciplines, which also goes to show that this position is more or less widespread and is backed both institutionally and editorially.

Sometimes, though, authors from the first group do concede the idea that the correlation is minimal and thus conclude that its impact on grammar is negligible. Although this may seem conflictive or

incompatible at first glance, it is just a consequence of the underlying premise that language (specifically grammar) must be separated from social, cultural or political issues. In fact, some of them explicitly state this idea:

On the other hand, it is clear that a simple change in language cannot transmute the reality outside it. (...) Language can only succeed in transforming external reality through the content of the messages it articulates, not through its own form. (Roca, 2015: 4)

When establishing the relationship between ‘sex and language’, we should bear in mind that it is not sex that we correlate, but sexism, that is, a cultural phenomenon (...) [grammatical gender], as a category subject to the rules governing grammar—or, if preferred, language—cannot be correlated with any extralinguistic element. (Junyent, 2007: 1)

A similar trend has been pointed out by Bengoechea (2015: 24), who observes that many advocates of the generic masculine resort to the theory of markedness to justify the generic value of this grammatical gender and in turn state that language and specifically linguistic gender should be separated from social, cultural or political issues (for critiques to this trend, cf. Bengoechea, 2015). Many of the texts analyzed in this paper do cite the theory of markedness at some point.

Something that should be noted here, too, is that all texts from the corpus dismiss the existence of extralinguistic gender, equating it to what they call ‘sex.’ Therefore, when talking about gender, they exclusively refer to linguistic gender. This can be easily seen in their view of sexual division as a matter of only biology while ignoring any social dimension, but also in their references to binarism and their claims about a presumed confusion between gender and sex. It is even explicitly stated in some of them:

The word gender has recently been adopted internationally to mean ‘sex’ for technical reasons perhaps relevant in certain fields, especially those related to sociology, but irrelevant for the language of ordinary citizens (...). It is clear, however, that if sex is called gender—the traditional and usual word for grammatical gender—the inevitable result must be total confusion: like calling an egg egg but also chestnut. It is key that sex stays being sex and gender stays being gender, without mixing, except perhaps in the areas of social anthropology from which the proposal originated. (Roca, 2015: 2)

Gender is a grammatical property that allows the classification of morphological classes of nouns: a class of masculine nouns and another one of feminine nouns. (...) Sex, on the other hand, refers to the division in certain species of living beings between males and females according to a set of biochemical, physiological, and organic traits. (Institut d'Estudis Catalans, 2023: 2)

4. A POSTSTRUCTURALIST RESPONSE

The assumptions and premises that I will tackle now are the following:

1. The consideration of the category of sex and binarism as a given fact, something natural, biological and consequentially unchangeable, with well-defined limits, without questioning it nor considering its social dimension. Additionally, the claim that people tend to confuse sex and gender.
2. The perspective that the correlation they talk about is between body traits and linguistic gender.
3. The dismissal of the correlation as something negligible or not having an impact on our lives.
4. Finally, the idea that language or language rules cannot reinforce realities such as social constructs even with its form, not just its message.

4. 1. The discursive limits of sex

To tackle the first point, virtually all the analyzed texts and their authors conceptualize the category of sex as something objective, static, purely ‘biological’, prior and foundational to anything else, the materiality upon which our human bodies are built. This vision has long been questioned by Queer Theory: “I want to ask how and why ‘materiality’ has become a sign of irreducibility, that is, how is it that the materiality of sex is understood as that which only bears cultural constructions and, therefore, cannot be a construction?” (Butler, 2011: 4). This vision also implies a strictly binary conception of sex, with only two options to be put into, male or female, depending on the assignment at birth, which in turn is usually based on the inspection of genitals by a doctor upon being born. For Butler and others, though:

Sexed bodies are not empty matter on which gender is constructed and sex categories are not picked out on the basis of objective features of the world. Instead, our sexed bodies are themselves discursively constructed: they are the way they are, at least to a substantial extent, because of what is attributed to sexed bodies and how they are classified (Mikkola, 2024: § 3.3)

Of course, this categorization of sex is based on some physicality (genitals, as stated before), but it is always the result of a social lecture of the body. This is to say that the existence of bodies, their materiality or the differences between them are not denied, but rather it is argued that what we call sex is not a descriptive category, but prescriptive and performative, built upon the countless interactions we have had with this category in our lives:

When the doctor calls a newly born infant a girl or a boy, s/he is not making a descriptive claim, but a normative one. [...] In effect, the doctor's utterance makes infants into girls or boys. We, then, engage in activities that make it seem as if sexes naturally come in two and that being female or male is an objective feature of the world, rather than being a consequence of certain constitutive acts (that is, rather than being performative) (Mikkola, 2024: § 3.3)

Of course, this must not be understood as if doctors single-handedly have a hidden agenda or are somehow incentivized to put everyone in one of these two boxes, since they just adhere to the hegemonic idea that our external genitalia determine what we are and will be. But, of course, that idea denies countless realities of people who do not necessarily fall into one of these categories.

Because of this imposed assignment, sex becomes an administrative category in the sense that it is usually noted down on IDs and other official documents, on the base of which one can be discriminated, especially if their physical traits do not adhere to the traditional idea of what their 'sex' looks like. Because of these and other observations, Butler considers both the categories of sex and gender to be equally socially constructed, hence a purely biological conception of sex is to be dismissed:

Gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or 'a natural sex' is

produced and established as ‘prediscursive’, prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts (Butler, 2006: 10)

No trace of these social dimensions of sex is attested in the analyzed texts from the corpus, which means that their claims tend to be bioessentialist and binary.

4. 2. “Sex and (linguistic) gender are correlated”

Based on this bioessentialist and binary conception of sex, what is implied by them saying that linguistic gender is correlated with sex when referring to humans, is that our bodies determine which linguistic gender we are to be addressed with. This idea is naive at best and extremely harmful at worst.

To be clear, and strictly descriptively speaking, a correlation does exist: the masculine linguistic gender is tied to and used to talk specifically about men, while the feminine is tied to and used to talk specifically about women. Let us revisit example (1) once more:

- (1) a. La fornera està cansada
[the.FEM.SG baker.FEM.SG is tired.FEM.SG]
- b. El forner està cansat
[the.MASC.SG baker.MASC.SG is tired.MASC.SG]

As stated earlier in this paper, assuming we refer to a specific person, the forms index that the baker in (1a) is a woman, and the one in (1b) is a man. It does not really matter if the names of the linguistics genders are *masculine* and *feminine* (they could be called gender 1 and gender 2), what is important here is the fact that one is used for men and the other for women, and precisely that the categories of *man* and *woman* are naturalized, taken for granted. The idea that the feminine must be used for women and the masculine for men is, in fact, so deeply rooted in our society that for most people it is almost inconceivable for men to start using feminine gender forms or for women to use masculine ones.

This correlation, however, is not an inherent property of people or bodies, of course, but something that one is assigned at birth along with their sex/gender assignment. An example of this is the fact that falling into one category (man/woman) does not somehow automatically or

magically make everyone refer to one in the correlated forms (masculine/feminine); for example, when a speaker does not know the person they are referring to beforehand and reads them as pertaining to the ‘wrong’ extralinguistic gender, using the ‘wrong’ correlated linguistic forms when speaking, *i.e.*, someone addressing a man in feminine forms because he ‘looks’ like a woman from behind for having long hair⁵. This bioessentialist trend has been pointed out for example by Zimman (2017), who analyzes and critiques the automatic association of certain voice traits with a certain sex, arguing that these voice traits are culturally and socially built, based on voice data pertaining to trans men.

This automatic correlation can thus be questioned, as it is arguably one of the core linguistic elements of the cisheteronormative binary gender system and a way of enforcing it. It is, in turn, a tool for socially constructing both the categories of sex and extralinguistic gender, because from the moment someone is assigned a sex/gender at birth (a prescriptive more than descriptive act in Butlerian terms), the correlated linguistic gender is also automatically assigned to them according to those imposed categories, which makes them inseparable from each other in people’s minds. So, when using linguistically gendered forms according to the binary, we are in turn maintaining and reinforcing the categories of *man* and *woman*, and their association with their respective linguistic gender.

This association has been normalized, but it is the result of a forceful assignment. It is important to keep in mind, though, that this assignment is not the result of a planned scheme by some unknown power, but rather the naturalization of the two categories as a result of the sedimentation of many iterations that over time granted linguistic gender the value of pointing to (and reinforcing) an extralinguistic reality (Motschenbacher, 2010). Again, this naturalizes and reinforces the idea that our bodies are clearly divided into two categories, and they determine what we are, will be and how we are to be treated.

Biological-determinist ideas like that have been contested at least since De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (2011[1949]), but still today can be seen in the foundations of many lines of argument, as in the texts shown above. Evidently, not everyone fits into this binarism or into this

⁵ As a reviewer points out, this example invokes the concept of ‘passing’, which has been contested in Trans Studies because it can have a coercive, normative implicature. Here, I am referring to it only descriptively.

automatic association, especially considering the implied coercive norm that one cannot escape the social reading of their body and how they are to be treated because of it.

Besides that, by claiming that this correlation exists without questioning it, these authors and institutions are enforcing it, whether consciously or not. As Butler (2011) herself says:

Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements that, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power [...] statements which not only perform an action, but confer a binding power on the action performed (Butler, 2011: 171)

A clear sign of this is the fact that some of the analyzed texts use deontics when stating one should use the feminine or the masculine linguistic gender according to the sex of the person they are referring to. This implies a prescriptive position stemming from power. There is also the fact that some of these texts come from Catalan normative institutions (IEC, 2016, 2023; AVL, 2006), which, while trying to sound more neutral or descriptive, still stem from the same bioessentialist framework, are prescriptive in nature and have binding power over language. Even if this was not the case, naturalizing the binary leaves out a significant amount of people.

Claims like those, especially coming from places of power (normative institutions, style guides, renowned linguists...), are never neutral, and they precisely enable harmful, dangerous behaviors like not using someone's preferred linguistic gender because of their body. In fact, trans-exclusionary people tend to use these authorities as a justification for purposefully misgendering trans people. Taking all that into account, it can be concluded that uncritically claiming that sex is what determines linguistic gender is dangerous and enables harmful acts, especially against people whose bodies do not 'fit' into the social expectations of what they should look like or what traits they should have for their gender.

4. 3. “Sex and (linguistic) gender cannot be correlated”

On the other hand, the second group claims that no correlation exists at all, that sex and linguistic gender are independent from each other, and

often justify it claiming that these categories are not correlated in all languages or that the words that vary in gender according to the referent make up just a small percentage of all gendered words. This idea may look like an advance at first sight, because they seem to say that linguistic gender should not be related to physical traits.

However, upon closer inspection of these statements it is evident that they do not actually stem from a critical consideration of the categories of sex and linguistic gender, but from the premise that grammar should be a matter completely separated from politics, culture or 'biology,' something that can be derived from their line of argument and even some explicitly state. Therefore, their conception of sex and gender is still bioessentialist, binary and completely dismisses the social dimension of these categories.

So, as stated before, an imposed correlation does exist, and it is enforced and reproduced every day with almost every utterance we produce referring to a person, because many if not most personal nouns and adjectives do present gender variation. Ignoring this fact seems a way to downplay how much binarism is rooted in society and how it can affect us.

Besides that, it seems dismissive to state that something is unimportant because it is only present in a small percentage of a total, especially when this small percentage of words constantly appears in and permeates many of our everyday interactions. A possible reason for this statement is the fact that most of the time, the correlation is invisible, meaning it is so rooted in our belief system that it does not stand out at all. This is a sign that the correlation is a hegemonic idea, and thus:

[It] is not perceived as a means of dominance, but as something natural and accepted by society as a whole. The belief that 'it has always been like that' and 'it cannot be any other way' that characterizes hegemonic ideologies is mainly achieved through discourse: the ideas and ways to talk about the things that happen around us, explaining the world and relationships between human beings. (Bengoechea, 2015: 12)

Moreover, the idea that languages (especially grammar) must be separated from cultural or social issues is misleading and another way of dismissing how rooted binarism is in our society and how its enforcement shapes our lives. A poststructuralist perspective allows us to see that the rules of grammar can also be performative, because of ritualization,

repetition and association with a certain social construct (extralinguistic gender, in this case). Thus, they do have an impact on societies, specifically sexual/gender identity construction and hegemonic ideas about this topic. As Motschenbacher (2010) puts it:

Linguistic signs have the power to construct identities because they have gone through a process of repeated performance in which they have obtained this performative potential. For example, certain linguistic features have the potential to index the meaning ‘female’ and ‘male’. On the level of the language system, this pertains to gendered nouns and pronouns or grammatically gendered forms. (Motschenbacher, 2010: 24)

As stated earlier, if one considers linguistic gender to have a performative value through which social categories (mainly the sex/gender binary) are constructed, this goes to show that linguistic gender not only has a performative power but can also be a tool to enforce the binary; in other words, the result of the association has a prescriptive implication, even when this is not the intention. This perspective opens the door to critiques, challenges to the norm and the proposal of alternatives without incurring in the idea that the grammatical system is somehow an untouchable, independent entity that should not be modified at all. To be clear, this is not to say that anyone can change the rules of grammar at will just because, but rather that those rules have a social dimension that helps shaping realities or constructs, and this fact can be challenged by modifying the rules.

All in all, questioning this correlation must not automatically mean that one can deem it unimportant or dismiss it, since it does affect and shape our lives in a certain way. So, stating that no correlation exists also becomes dangerous, because it completely ignores and thus naturalizes the coercion and imposition of the sex/gender categories upon people. Moreover, it is a way to ignore the complaints and claims from people who question this imposition and may not feel comfortable within the constraints of binarism.

4. 4. Challenging the norm

Something that none of the analyzed texts explicitly consider is the idea that the imposition of the correlation between linguistic and extralinguistic gender can in fact be contested. With this I do not refer to the use of the generic masculine, epicenes or collective nouns (something

that is already contemplated in the traditional rules of grammar), but rather to the possibility of challenging the social norm that binds the feminine linguistic gender to women and the masculine to men, and/or the use of the masculine as a generic. As Motschenbacher (2010: 77) points out: “Grammatical gender can usefully be employed for gender deconstruction where deviances from the tendency of ‘feminine equals female’ and ‘masculine equals male’ can be found.”

Thus, these challenges can mean the use of grammatical and/or lexical forms not traditionally associated with one’s extralinguistic gender, or the use of the feminine gender with a generic value. These phenomena can usually be attested in (but are not limited to) queer spaces, feminist associations, some online communities, etc. I will now briefly cover some examples⁶:

A first example is the fact that some men (generally homosexual) can sometimes refer to themselves and/or other men (generally also homosexual) using feminine forms (both grammatical and lexical) as opposed to masculine ones, even though this is usually not systematic and tends to have more of a stylistic purpose. This phenomenon has been covered for example in Spanish by Navarro-Carrascosa (2020; 2021: § 6.2), who analyzes its use mainly among homosexual men, and their attitudes about it. This trend can be perceived as something rather parodic and indeed Navarro-Carrascosa (2020, 2021) points out that some homosexual men use this strategy with a clear negative value for criticizing other homosexual men. Nevertheless, it is a non-canonical use that falls outside the norm.

Another trend that seems more systematic is attested in the drag community, where queens tend to refer to themselves in feminine and kings in masculine according to their character regardless of their extralinguistic gender⁷. Drag queens and kings, however, perform the gender of their persona in a rather exaggerated way, and thus one could argue that this is not a challenge to the binary but indeed a reinforcement, since they engage in the canonical use of the gender. Indeed, their challenge is on the exaggeration of the performance, not in their use of linguistic gender.

⁶ The following is not an extensive list, and many of these examples are not extracted directly from Catalan, but can nevertheless be extrapolated to it as well as to other languages with a masculine/feminine gender system.

⁷ See Catalan-speaking drag queens like Ferrxn (*s. d.*) or Pam Demia (*s. d.*).

There are also people who may prefer to be systematically addressed with a linguistic gender that is not traditionally tied to their extralinguistic gender or lack of it; an example of this is Gartzea (2022), who refers to himself and wants to be addressed with the masculine linguistic gender as a political statement, despite not being a man.

Finally, there is also the use of the generic feminine, a linguistic strategy that implies the use of the feminine instead of the masculine when referring to a group of people regardless of extralinguistic gender, or when the intention is for it to have a universal value. This generic feminine is normally used by some feminist organizations, political parties (cf. Bach & Tomàs, 2017), other kind of left-wing associations or individuals as a means to protest or challenge androcentrism. This trend has been thoroughly criticized by many, usually resorting to some of the arguments present in the texts reviewed before (markedness theory, lack of relationship between linguistic gender and extralinguistic issues, etc.), or just dismissing it as nonsensical.

One must keep in mind, though, that these challenges do not imply that identities, acts and attitudes are a choice just like deciding which outfit to wear. Subjects are rather determined “right in between complete freedom and total restriction, with freedom being normatively restricted, but not fully determined, by dominant discourses.” (Motschenbacher, 2010: 14). These examples are just responses, the material result to the realization that there exist oppressive social norms or categories in which not everybody fits, even if their main or original objective was not to actually challenge anything but to be more of a stylistic choice.

While many more examples could be covered here (cf. Baker, 2002, 2008: § 2; Motschenbacher, 2010: § 4.6; Livia, 2001; Johnsen, 2001, *i.a.*), it is true that these are exceptions and are not representative of general use. However, they are real, attested challenging uses of linguistic gender that should not be ignored just for the sake of simplicity.

4. 5. Beyond binarism

Up until now, I have covered linguistic gender in its masculine/feminine binarism, and its imposed correlation with the extralinguistic binary sex/gender system. Both, as is evident, lack options for people who do not fit into either of the two traditional categories, who I call ‘non-binary’ as an umbrella term.

Thus, speakers face the need to ‘name’ non-binary people, which is difficult considering that our linguistic gender system is binary, as stated before. Two possibilities arise: Indirect Non-Binary Language (INL) or Direct Non-Binary Language (DNL) (López, 2019, 2020; Míguez & López, 2021), as discussed previously on the theoretical framework section.

For Spanish DNL, several proposals for ‘neuter’ neomorphemes have been made (see López, 2019), with the most successful being *-e*, whose first advocate seems to be García-Meseguer (1976). This new gender is built upon the feminine, only replacing the morpheme *-a* for the aforementioned *-e*, which is not directly tied or related to the binary:

- (3) a. ElØ traductorØ está cansado
[The.MASC.SG translator.MASC.SG is tired.MASC.SG]
- b. La traductora está cansada
[The.FEM.SG translator.FEM.SG is tired.FEM.SG]
- c. Le traductore está cansade
[The.NEU.SG translator.NEU.SG is tired.NEUT.SG]

In Catalan, no formal proposal for a DNL neomorpheme had been introduced up until recently, even though some strategies were already in use among non-binary people to refer to themselves. This situation changed with the *Guia gramatical de llenguatge no-binari* [A Grammatical Guide for a Non-Binary Language] (Moyano, 2023), which introduces the neomorpheme *-i*, not tied to the binary gender system:

- (4) a. ElØ traductorØ està cansatØ
[The.MASC.SG translator.MASC.SG is tired.MASC.SG]
- b. La traductora està cansada
[The.FEM.SG translator.FEM.SG is tired.FEM.SG]
- c. Li traductori està cansadi
[The.NEU.SG translator.NEU.SG is tired.NEU.SG]

This new ‘neuter’ or non-binary linguistic gender is built upon the feminine, just like the Spanish neomorpheme, replacing the *-a* for the *-i*.

The /i/ was chosen because it is the only vowel present in the vocalic system of all Catalan dialects that can work as a unstressed gender morpheme without being tied to the masculine/feminine binary.

This is because the other vowels and the zero morpheme are already associated to the binary in at least some dialects and subdialects: -Ø, -e, -o are already associated to the masculine, and -a to the feminine. Other existing vowels in Catalan like /ə/, /ɛ/ and /ɔ/ could be also used, but they remain problematic: the first is not present in all dialects, the second is an allophone of -a dialectally in North-Western Catalan, and the last one cannot generally appear in unstressed syllables. Other systems have been in use in the NB community, like using -x in written form, or using -e just like Spanish. The first proposal, though, cannot be produced orally, and the -e is already somewhat tied to the masculine for the singular (a subgroup of nouns like *teatre* are masculine) and to the feminine in Western dialects for the plural (forner[a] → forner[es] in Western Catalan, forner[əs] in Eastern Catalan).

The neomorpheme has some disadvantages. To cite some of them: there is a subdialect that already uses /i/ for some word endings, modifying the core rules of grammar is something difficult to get used to; the /i/ can also be difficult to understand for speakers still not used to it or for deaf people; some new forms coincide with preexistent ones, and /i/ seems to carry a somewhat-burlesque pragmatic value, as it can sometimes be used in place of other vowels in words as a way to mock what others said. The *Guide* does not offer a clear solution for these problems and leaves most of these as open questions to be answered, because they depend on the expansion and the normalization of this neomorpheme, and how Catalan speakers (both non-binary and binary) will react to it.

However, the positive points of this proposal are that the neomorpheme -i bears no previous gender load, it is intuitive and it is the one with the least difficulties when it comes to applying it to as many Catalan varieties as possible. Ultimately, the proposal is solid and coherent overall, and it cannot be dismissed on behalf of supposed methodological deficiencies.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I have reviewed a collection of texts by Catalan linguists, academics and normative works on the topic of linguistic

gender when talking about humans. This has led me to extract their position and their underlying premises, which have been scrutinized and responded to in the analysis section, within the theoretical framework of Queer Theory, Queer Linguistics and Trans Linguistics.

As discussed in the analysis, these authors usually fall into one two groups: those who claim that sex and linguistic gender are correlated and those who claim that this correlation is unimportant or negligible. Both groups, though, agree on the idea that sex is ‘biological’, binary and it should not be confused with (linguistic) gender, while dismissing the existence of extralinguistic gender.

This position on the category of sex can be harmful, since it denies or dismisses any type of deviation from the imposed norm, and implies an underlying, coercive and prescriptive assignment according to physical traits (usually genitalia upon being born). This may not be a problem for those who happen to fall inside and feel comfortable inside their traditional assigned sex/gender, but it implies a lot of social, coercive, and even physical and/or sexual violence to people who are expected to behave or be a certain way according to how their bodies are perceived by others. This is not to say that these authors exert direct violence on people, but rather that their premises are the foundation upon which this specific kind of violence is exerted.

Importantly, their perspective also tacitly refuses any kind of deviation in the realm of linguistic gender, since they tend to ignore examples like those cited in the previous section of people not using the ‘expected’ grammatical gender in several circumstances for any number of reasons. The existence of these exceptions is important and more relevant than ever, since, for example, some non-binary people may not feel comfortable using their own language if it lacks a DNL strategy that covers their needs.

In light of this, it is clear that a shift in the traditional framework is needed for Catalan to become a language in which one can communicate without the prescriptive pressure of (linguistic) gender norms. Thus, more research within the framework of Queer and Trans Linguistics is needed from the Catalan-speaking academia. Also, the normative institutions should reconsider their stance on the automatic, prescriptive association between linguistic gender and sex, and, consequentially, they should revise their stance on non-binary neomorphemes too, even if it is something that at first contravenes the grammatical core rules of language.

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