Queering the French Académie: Reclaiming linguistic authority for trans and non-binary people

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Trans and non-binary communities have long known the importance of linguistic practices and the power that determining the meaning of words and which words fit has over one's feelings of validation, visibility, acceptance and existence. In the French-speaking context, and in France, especially, trans and non-binary people not only have to construct their identities within a strongly binary language but also face the gatekeeping and constraining power of the French Académie. This article examines the linguistic practices of trans users on two online forums and highlights three main strategies used by French-speaking trans and non-binary individuals: (1) the non-normative use of binary grammatical gender to index non-binary identities, (2) the reframing of body parts as either non-indexical of sex/gender or as indexing only one's self-identified sex/gender, and (3) the use of English terminology.

1 Introduction

Trans and non-binary communities have long known the importance of linguistic practices and the power that determining the meaning of words and which words fit has over one's feelings of validation, visibility, acceptance and existence (for an extremely rich analysis of transgender history in the USA, see Stryker 2008; for more about the power of naming, see Bourdieu 1989). Language has the potential to empower each and every one of us by giving us the possibility to name the previously unnamable, to speak of the unspeakable, and to make sense of the unintelligible. In recent years, the role of language has been confirmed to be of vital importance for trans and non-binary communities. Russell et al. (2018), for instance, have shown that transgender and gender non-conforming youth have lower rates of depression, suicidal ideation, and suicidal behavior when their chosen names are used in multiple contexts. Just as pronouns and names tend to pattern together with usage, and given that pronouns reflect gender categorization even more obviously than names, the use of chosen pronouns may prove an even stronger correlation to the improvement of one's mental health.

In the USA and the English-speaking Global North at large, activism has centered on practices of linguistic self-determination and self-identification (Stanley 2014; Zimman 2017a).¹ This empowering form of linguistic agency can be seen at work in many practices of the trans and non-binary communities: in choosing to talk about pronoun *use* instead of pronoun *preference*, in having the freedom to decide what to name your body parts, in being able to create a new word for the identity category that best describes you, in countering an imbalance by naming what used to be seen as the norm and didn't need to be made visible,

¹ Here, by using Global North, I am referring to the area of the world where resources and power have been historically concentrated due to colonial and imperial geographical arrangements. This is not just limited to economic and political power but also encompasses academic, discursive and epistemological influences insofar as knowledge production from the Global North is often privileged and expanded to the rest of the world. This binary arrangement is reductive as neither the Global North nor its counterpart, the Global South, are homogenous and many communities from within the Global North and their epistemologies are undervalued, but for our purpose, thinking through this formation sheds light on the ways in which transness and how it is studied and conceptualized often stem from a very specific geographical, historical and epistemological location.

etc. According to Zimman (and building from Inoue 2007), such an emphasis on individual freedom shouldn't make one think that power dynamics are erased and that individuals have access to the same level of linguistic agency. Identity should be seen as dialogic; this dialogue, however, does not limit every individual in the same way, and dynamics of systematic oppression need to be kept in mind (Zimman 2017a).

Linguistic self-determination is not a magical solution to transphobia and the many types of discrimination experienced by the trans and non-binary communities in education, employment, health, housing, identification documents or public accommodations, among others (for an in-depth analysis of the many layers of discriminations experienced by trans individuals, see Grant et al. 2011). Many in the most conservative regions of the USA and the English-speaking Global North still do not accept these naming and identification practices as legitimate (see, for instance, the non-consensual de-transitioning of trans people in obituaries and other memorialization processes as described by Whitestone et al. 2020 or the constant misgendering of murdered trans and non-binary individuals in news reports). It has nonetheless led to the implementation of many new policies such as the ability to choose names and pronouns on the rosters of many universities across the U.S. and the legal recognition of the non-binary gender marker 'X' on driver's licenses by 19 states and the District of Columbia (as of January 2021).

To what extent, however, could this reality be transposed to another culture and another language? Are these successes dependent on the specific linguistic and political realities of the Anglo-American world? Could linguistic self-determination be available to trans and non-binary individuals existing in a language and a culture that have given linguistic authority to a single entity or group of people? How much of this freedom to self-determine is dependent on the linguistic culture one is raised in? Do trans and non-binary communities speaking a language with a strong gender binary show the same level of linguistic self-determining practices and are these practices yielding similar positive results?

Research in Hindi (Hall 2002, 2009), Portuguese (Borba and Ostermann 2007) and Hebrew (Bershtling 2014) has shown a high level of linguistic innovation from trans and non-binary individuals navigating their languages' strict gender binaries and would point towards different possibilities for bending binary grammatical genders to fit non-binary identities. The example of French, however, seems to differ from these other languages for two main reasons: (1) while Hindi, Hebrew, and Portuguese often have distinct endings marking for the masculine and feminine forms of adjectives or verbs, French regularly only marks feminine forms (with an additional "e" in most cases, for example) while masculine forms tend to be seen as unmarked or neutral; and (2) the French language is represented by its own official institution, the Académie Française, which wields linguistic authority and decision-making power over usages, vocabulary, spelling, grammar, etc., and thus creates one additional gatekeeping entity which might limit trans and non-binary individuals' ability to self-determine. This article thus furthers the discussion on transgender language and linguistic practices in the aforementioned languages and in the English-speaking context (Zimman 2014, 2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2018b, 2019; Zimman and Edelman 2014; Hazenberg 2017; Feu'u 2017), and, following the works of A.J. Shroy or Florence Ashley, extends it to the study of the French and francophone transgender and non-binary communities.

2 Grammatical gender in French

As stated above, the case of French is interesting for two main reasons. First, it is a language characterized by a strong gender binary (similarly to Spanish, Italian, Hebrew, or Arabic); in French, every noun, whether referring to a person, a thing, or a concept, is either feminine or masculine. Articles, adjectives, pronouns and, in certain situations, past participles, all have to correspond to the grammatical gender of the noun they refer to. Some have explored the possibility of a "natural" association between the gender of words and the empirical realities they represent or the etymological sources they come from (see Violi 1987). Others have pointed at the existence of several kinds of grammatical genders, as in Keller's (2013) model, which differentiates between four kinds of gender: "natural," morphological, syntactical, and epicene. As already noted earlier, an important aspect of French grammatical gender is that, in many cases, only the feminine is marked with a specific ending, while the masculine form is unmarked, adding an imbalance in the binary

between the masculine form seen as the regular, neutral, normal form of the word and the feminine form seen as different or other. The four categories of gender listed in the model above are even further complicated by the existence of (1) homonyms or homophones whose meanings change along with their grammatical genders (*un moule*, masculine, is ‘a mold’ while *une moule*, feminine, is ‘a mussel’; *un chêne*, masculine, is ‘an oak’ while *une chaîne*, feminine, is ‘a channel’ or ‘a chain’), (2) of words that are masculine in the singular but feminine in the plural, such as *amour* (‘love’), *orgue* (‘organ’, the musical instrument) and *délice* (‘a delicious thing’ or ‘a delight’), and (3) by exceptional cases such as the word *gens* (‘people’) for which adjectives are feminine when placed before the noun, but masculine when placed after. Furthermore, Ayoun’s (2010) compilation of Tucker et al.’s (1977) tokens of the distribution of gender according to word-final consonantal phones indicates that extremely few word endings systematically and without exception index their grammatical genders. However, despite these studies and many jokes from French-speaking people about grammatical gender in our language – why is ‘a beard’, *une barbe*, feminine while ‘a breast’, *un sein*, is masculine? – most would still agree that the grammatical gender of words referring to people follow a “natural,” “normal,” “logical” connection to the gender or sex of the individual in question. In addition, language in France still tends to be presented, even among progressive academic settings, as a neutral, natural, objective phenomenon devoid of any ideological or political agenda and power. This view in turn leads linguistic innovation to be seen in a mostly negative light since no one should create new terms or expressions in order to further their political or ideological views. One of the biggest proponents supporting this ideology remains to this date the Académie Française.

3 The Académie Française²

The Académie Française was founded in 1635 by Cardinal Richelieu, King Louis XIII’s chief minister, and was officially tasked in 1637 by the Parliament of Paris “to give exact rules to our language and to render it capable of treating the arts and sciences.”³ To this end, the members of the Académie were officially given the duty to “establish rules of orthography which will be imperative for everyone to follow.”⁴ Very quickly appeared a political, ideological and cultural ideal for French to become the Latin of modern times and be used as a *lingua franca* throughout Europe and the world (Wright 2006), thus starting a political and ideological work to create a language seen as official and legitimate (for more on the history behind these processes, see Bourdieu 2001). Variation became the natural enemy of such a project and subsequent missions of the Académie were to stabilize orthography and create a clear boundary between French and other languages and dialects through the creation of dictionaries listing which words are French and, by exclusion, which ones are not.⁵ Throughout its almost four centuries of existence, the Académie has initiated many orthographic reforms, always creating controversies and resistance, especially from the teachers supposed to enforce them.⁶ In addition to its linguistic endeavors, the Académie also judges the literary qualities of works of prose, theater and poetry, defines the rules for different literary genres, awards prizes and honorific titles, and influences the overall creation of a canon of French Literature. The Académie’s website defines its main mission as one of defending the French language, and although it does not explicitly state from whom or what, several “dangers” could be identified when looking at the Académie’s regulating and norm-creating initiatives. Creating stable orthographic rules has for long been a way to counter regional variations influenced by local languages whether they were ideologically constructed as dialects, creoles,

² All the historical information contained in this section has been retrieved from the Académie Française’s website: <http://www.academie-francaise.fr/linstitution/lhistoire>

³ Article XXIV: “La principale fonction de l’Académie sera de travailler avec tout le soin et toute la diligence possibles à donner des règles certaines à notre langue et à la rendre pure, éloquente et capable de traiter les arts et les sciences.”

⁴ Article XLIV: “Seront édictées pour l’orthographe des règles qui s’imposeront à tous.”

⁵ For instance, distinguishing *i* and *j* or *v* and *u*; using accents and fixing their rule of pronunciation; removing some silent final consonants and creating patterns between sounds and spelling; homogenizing verb endings; etc.

⁶ The reform from 1990, for instance, which abruptly changed the use of accents and the spelling of several words as well as modified rules of plural-agreement for hyphenated words or foreign words, among many other modifications, was only applied to textbooks in 2016 and is still not widely followed.

or foreign languages. The more recent institution of the Commission for the Enrichment of the French Language⁷ – tasked with the creation of French alternatives for foreign words used in French and for French words “organically” created by French people and deemed “incorrect” – shows the Académie’s fear of French being contaminated by the now *lingua franca*, English, or by linguistic initiatives from laypeople.⁸ Should we, however, expect members of the Académie (mostly old white men, virtually all straight and cisgender) to hold a commission of neology and terminology on gender, sexuality, or sex?

The Académie thus has the task, even today, to act as an official authority on language. On paper, its rulings are only advisory, not binding on either the public or the government. This doesn’t mean, however, that it does not have any influence on these two spheres. The institution was funded by Richelieu, chief minister at the time, who became the protector of the Académie; upon his death, the title was transferred to Pierre Séguier, then Chancellor of France, and, following his own death in 1672, to King Louis XIV. Following this tradition, the President of France is now the protector of the Académie.⁹ Thanks to its strong ties to the government, the Académie has been instrumental in many a legal decision. Starting in the 80s and up to this date, the Académie has opposed the feminization of professions, even after Québec, Belgium and Switzerland have all taken steps towards it. In 1994, it helped create the *Loi Toubon* (‘Toubon Law’) which requires the use of French in public and governmental contexts and reasserts the use of French as one of the most fundamental rights of French people, in turn allowing the Académie to justify the purging of many borrowings from other languages, as legally, nobody should have to use another language in their day-to-day life and activities. More recently, it also opposed many attempts from feminist theorists and activists to make the French language more inclusive (discussed in more details below) – soon after, the government decided not to adopt these new initiatives in official texts and writings.

Through its influence and many of its rulings and activities, the Académie has become a strong symbol of French prescriptivism and of an ideological position against idiosyncrasy and idiolects; regional variations are looked down upon and “fixed” through the hammering of standard French into the minds of countless students under the institution of strict grammar classes and dictation exercises to control spelling. The Académie again and again voices its concerns about the “incorrect” linguistic creations of French citizens, for instance through its monthly online posts to its official website titled “Dire, ne pas dire” (‘What to say, what not to say’) in which are listed what are seen as “mistakes,” “wrong usage,” “linguistic abuse,” or “neologisms” and “anglicisms” (which are not *real* French words). As briefly seen above, the Académie’s gatekeeping role and position is not uncontested and French-speaking people nowadays are often faced with mixed signals; the influence of the Académie is not univocal across the French-speaking world and if one is to examine the current linguistic practices of French-speaking individuals, one ought to be aware of the latest linguistic controversies and debates in the French political and culture scenes.¹⁰

4 Recent linguistic debates and controversies

In this context, most linguistic debates have historically surrounded the few words (mostly, but not exclusively, names of professions) that “officially” only have one gendered form viewed by the Académie as “neutral” or epicene (similarly to *enfant* – ‘child’ or *élève* – ‘pupil’). This neutrality, however, is often contested as many people do not believe it a coincidence that many positions of authority and power only have a masculine form as epicene, while negatively viewed occupations only have a feminine form as epicene. *Auteur* (‘author’), *écrivain* (‘writer’), *professeur* (‘professor’) or *peintre* (‘painter’), for instance,

⁷ This commission was created in 1996 but was called the Commission for Terminology and Neology until 2015.

⁸ For instance, the Académie’s website states one needs to say *un logiciel rançonneur* (‘a ransomware’) instead of using the English term *un ransomware* or the neologism *un rançongiciel* (created from *rançon* – ‘ransom’ and *logiciel* – ‘software’).

⁹ Symbolically, this relationship can be visually represented by the presence of many French presidents in several of the pictures included on its website’s homepage.

¹⁰ French-speaking parts of Canada (but not only), for instance, rarely consult or follow the prescriptions of the French Académie; most of its authority concerns France specifically.

are not supposed to have a feminine form even when referring to a female writer, author, professor or painter; articles, adjectives and past participles will all be marked as masculine as well. On the other hand, *sage-femme* (literally ‘wise woman’, but these days used to refer to a labor and delivery nurse) is not supposed to have a masculine form although there are indeed men having this profession. Some professions also have both a feminine and a masculine form, but with very distinct connotations or meanings – *un couturier*, for instance, is ‘a fashion designer’, while *une couturière* is ‘a seamstress.’ In addition, some words show another form of bias, accepting a feminine form for one meaning but refusing it for another, depending on whether the word describes a position of power. *Doyen*, for example, has two very distinct meanings (either ‘a dean’ or ‘the oldest person in a group’) and will follow different rules in terms of gender agreement: a woman can be *une doyenne* (f) if she is *la doyenne des Français* (‘the oldest woman alive in France’) but she must be *un doyen* (m) if she is *le Doyen de l’université* (‘the dean of students’). Similarly, a woman will be able to be *la présidente d’un club de tennis* (‘the president of a tennis club’) but will have to be *le Président de la République* (‘the President of the French Republic’).

The Académie also still claims the masculine pronouns *il* (‘he’) and *ils* (masculine ‘they’) to be neutral (while the feminine versions *elle* and *elles* can only refer to women), thus encompassing both women and men, which would justify why one should use *il* to refer to an unknown person or *ils* to refer to a group composed of fifty women and one man, even though women are in majority. This second rule has infamously been named *le masculin l’emporte toujours sur le féminin* (‘the masculine always prevails over the feminine’) and is hammered into children’s brains in school as a fact, thus implying that the masculine is always stronger than the feminine. When an adjective is referring to both a feminine and a masculine noun, it will have to be written or (when applicable) pronounced in the masculine and will be understood as referring to both elements. For instance, in the sentence *mon frère et ma sœur sont gentils* (‘my brother and sister are nice’), the masculine form *gentil* has to be used over the feminine form *gentille*, because it has been decided that masculine forms can also apply to feminine and/or generic referents but not vice-versa.

Further research in the history of linguistic reforms in French (Viennot 2014, 2018) yields additional reasons for questioning the Académie’s claim that these rules are not ideological but just the “natural” evolution of the French language or etymologically deriving from the rules of Latin. All the rules addressed so far in this section have been instituted by the French Académie itself through linguistic reforms. In 2014, in an interview with the weekly French news magazine L’Obs (then known as Le Nouvel Observateur) Eliane Viennot addresses what she calls the “masculinist” opinions motivating many of the academicians’ positions (or thinkers and writers who became members of the Académie when it was created). She explains that before their influence at the beginning of the 17th century, the masculine did not prevail over the feminine but a rule of agreement by proximity or majority was followed. The aforementioned group of fifty women and one man would have been referred to using the feminine 3rd personal plural pronoun *elles*, while my previous example would have been written *mon frère et ma sœur sont gentilles* using the feminine form of the adjective because the feminine noun *sœur* is closer to it than the masculine *frère*. She also notes that some feminine pronouns were erased and absorbed by the masculine form, seen as neutral and capable to encompass men, women, things, concepts, ideas, etc. Such is the case, for instance, of the indirect object pronoun *lui* (‘to him’ or ‘to her’), which used to have a feminine counterpart (*la*). She adds that, later in the 17th century, many pre-existing feminine forms for professions were erased due to the idea that women should not have access to them at all. Among others, the feminine forms *autrice* (‘author’), *chirurgienne* (‘surgeon’), *peintresse* (‘painter’), *philosophe* (‘philosopher’) or *médecine* (‘medical doctor’) were once widely used before the Académie decreed the masculine forms were to be used even when talking about a woman. She argues elsewhere (Viennot 2006) that these ideological linguistic positions were in reaction to a bigger and bigger presence of women in the political and literary realms; in the 17th century, two queen regents acceded to power, thus reinforcing the role of women in the court, and many women writers (Marguerite de Valois, Madame de la Fayette, etc.) became highly regarded, despite their lack of access to education and official recognition. The exclusion of feminine forms and the creation of a more dominating masculine gender in grammar allowed for the continuation of a symbolic rejection of women and reasserted

the prevalence of men in society and positions of power, which parallels Bodine's (1975) findings in English.

To counteract these examples of sexism in the French language, feminist activists' and thinkers' attempts have focused on restoring the balance of the binary, that is, reinserting the feminine form when it had been erased, following the rules of majority and proximity, and creating forms of inclusive writing that would avoid using the masculine to refer to all humans. For instance, the Académie contends that the sentence *les étudiants^{m11} ont réussi leurs examens* ('the students passed their exams') does not only refer to male students, even though only the masculine form *étudiant* is used, but supposedly consists of a neutral use of the masculine to refer to all students, regardless of gender. For years, feminists have advocated for the juxtaposition of the feminine and masculine forms to include both women and men (*les étudiantes^f et les étudiants^m ont réussi leurs examens*) but have also recently proposed to superimpose the feminine and masculine forms using a period or an interpunct (*les étudiant.e.s* or *les étudiant-e.s*) as a shortened way of including both genders in writing (although both the feminine and masculine forms should be read out loud). This idea sparked a very virulent controversy. Members of the Académie even decried it as a deathly threat and warned the French public about its many, sometimes contradictory, dangers: too complex or confusing, will prevent foreigners from learning French, threatens the unity of our language, culture, and nation, etc.¹²

Although this last initiative could be used by non-binary and gender non-conforming people in writing to avoid inscribing themselves or others within the French gender binary, the vast majority of these feminist linguistic debates all seem to aim at recreating the binary in situation where one side (usually the masculine) had been reified as neutral or unmarked in gender. In France, virtually none of the most mediatized or widely documented debates appear to advocate for the creation of gender-neutral or non-binary forms in French, and none seem to promote a form of inclusive language that one could use in both oral and written communications. In this ideological and political linguistic context characterized by a lack of terminology and grammatical flexibility, how do trans and non-binary people construct identities, bodies, lives and experiences from outside the binary? How do they react to the many layers of gatekeeping discourses (from the Académie, the medical field or society at large, or even from the trans community itself) trying to control their speech and limit their linguistic self-determination? Can we expect to witness a high level of linguistic creativity and innovation similar to that discussed in research about English or Hebrew, or the recent adoption of -x endings in Spanish (as exemplified by its use in the title of Cashman's 2017 book)?

5 Analysis

In order to examine language use that wouldn't be prompted or influenced by an interview setting and that wouldn't be limited to the trans and non-binary circles I myself inhabit, I decided to look for forums focused on trans issues. After an online search, I opted for two forums in reason of their sizes and their high number of members: <http://www.i-trans.net/forum-trans/> and <http://ftm-transsexuel.com/forum/>.¹³ As of January 2018, the first site had 12697 members while the second had 2362. I-trans is administered by a trans woman but is open to all trans-identified folks and their lovers and allies (although most of the active members I have seen seem trans-feminine identified); the second one is specifically for trans men. On *ftm-transsexuel*, topics include sexual orientation and gender identity, hormones and surgery, passing, packing, binding, dating, coming out, finding a therapist or a surgeon, etc. On *i-trans*, the topics discussed are wider and members often talk about anything they want (even if unrelated to transness) but the most popular topics indeed concern living as trans.

¹¹ Throughout this article, the letters 'm,' 'f,' and 'e' will be used in superscript at the end of words to indicate that they index a masculine form, a feminine form, or an epicene form.

¹² See the Académie's declaration against inclusive writing: <http://www.academie-francaise.fr/actualites/declaration-de-lacademie-francaise-sur-lecriture-dite-inclusive>

¹³ This forum has unfortunately been erased since initial data collection but can be accessed via the Wayback Machine: <https://web.archive.org/web/20171127235117/http://ftm-transsexuel.com/forum>

My methodology browsing these forums was somewhat straight-forward. I identified three broad topics in which I would expect French-speaking trans and non-binary individuals to have to create new terms or otherwise work around the gender binary: (1) identity categories, especially recently coined gender identities and sexual orientations, (2) body parts, hormone treatments, surgical procedures and trans embodied practices (binding, packing, passing, tucking, etc.) as well as (3) (auto-)biographical information given as self-introduction or background for the stories members want to tell (as I would expect gendered terms and pronouns to be present there). I also selected these three topics for analysis because of how “controlled” they can be by outside authorities. France is infamous for being ideologically opposed to identity politics, which is seen as going against the view that we are all equal in the eyes of the Republic, and which is also used to explain the Académie’s belief that inclusive writing actually threatens the “unity” of the nation. New words for identity categories thus tend to be wildly resisted in many contexts; they are even more resisted when they come from English and are rejected by the Académie as *anglicismes*. For body parts and surgical procedures, the authority to name and control is normatively granted to the medical body, which might coin very complex French or Latinate terms with which trans people may have difficulty connecting. Terms for trans embodied practices, such as binding one’s chest or tucking one’s genitals, are usually comprised of acts named in English but which the Académie refuses to “officially” name so as to prevent them from being accepted in French culture. In France, the French-speaking trans and non-binary communities are thus in a double-bind: borrowing the English term will not be satisfactory because it will be judged as a foreign contamination, but only the Académie is supposed to be allowed to create new words, which they won’t do in this situation. Pronouns and other instances of grammatical gender are the types of innovations meeting the most resistance, as one would need to fundamentally transform the French language to create a third gender-neutral category for articles, pronouns and endings. When seeing the strong backlash from the Académie to the simple idea of feminist inclusive writing, one could expect even more violent discourses in reaction to an attempt at deconstructing or subverting the gender binary.

Despite this context, trans people are using language non-normatively and exhibiting a high level of linguistic creativity. Looking at several threads discussing the three broad categories listed above, three main linguistic strategies used by trans and non-binary French people can be identified: (1) non-normative use of binary grammatical gender to index non-binary identities, (2) reframing of body parts as either non-indexical of sex/gender (allowing the use of normative language) or as indexing only one’s self-identified sex/gender (allowing the use of non-normative language), and (3) use of English terminology. Interestingly, the first strategy is one that had already been identified in Hebrew and Portuguese, as well as in French literature, notably by trans individuals writing their memoirs (Livia 2001). The second strategy has also been identified by Zimman (2014) as occurring on English-language online forums where trans men were talking about sex, surgery and other topics in which they had to refer to their genitals. The third strategy, however, has not been discussed in the literature yet in this context.

5.1 *First strategy: non-normative use of binary grammatical gender*

The first example illustrates the non-normative use of binary grammatical gender. It is from an interaction on i-trans.net between Emmapeel (an AMAB non-binary person in their 50s)^{14,15} and Alexia (a transsexual woman in her 30s) which occurred on March 11th and 12th 2016. The first post from Emmapeel shown below (Table 1) is the first message of this thread – in it, Emmapeel introduces themselves, and Alexia, the first person to reply to them, mostly polices them. She sometimes calls out Emmapeel’s essentializing claims (such as their statement that they “think like a woman,” line 28) but mostly focuses on questioning and denying the possibility of non-binary identities. Throughout the exchange, Alexia expresses a lot of difficulty understanding how Emmapeel can say they are non-binary while at the same time asking to be

¹⁴ AMAB stands for “Assigned Male At Birth”.

¹⁵ Although Emmapeel uses feminine forms in French to counteract their sex-assigned-at-birth and potential gender attribution as well as to construct their non-binary identity, I have decided to use the pronouns they/them to refer to them so as to index more directly their disidentification with both binary genders.

referred to in the feminine, asking them “but then, wouldn’t you rather we see you as binary^e??” (i.e., as a woman or feminine). Even after Emmapeel explains to her that they decided to use the feminine while identifying as non-binary to counteract their masculine appearance (and a likely masculine gender attribution by others in their life) and regain a sense of balance between the two poles of the binary, Alexia still tells Emmapeel that being non-binary is impossible since one always has to define themselves one way or another within the binary.

Table 1. Emmapeel and Alexia¹⁶

1	E : Je parcours les forums depuis quelques semaines	E: I have been skimming through forums for the past
2	à la recherche de personnes sans genre ou bi-genre,	few weeks looking for people without gender or bi-
3	non-binaire. (...) Je suis née ^f homme physiquement,	gender, non-binary (...) I was born ^f physically a man,
4	et je me suis toujours considérée ^f comme « de genre	and I have always considered ^f myself as ‘of a
5	particulier », ni homme, ni femme. (...) Et je suis très	peculiar/distinct gender,’ neither man nor woman.
6	ouverte ^f d’esprit. J’aimerais écrire définitivement au	(...) And I am very open-minded ^f . I would definitely
7	féminin et rencontrer des personnes avec qui je	like to write in the feminine and meet with people with
8	parlerai également de moi au féminin, cela me fait un	whom I could speak of myself in the feminine, it does
9	bien fou.	me a power of good.
10		
11	A : (...) mais du coup là tu voudrais pas plutôt qu’on	A: (...) but then, don’t you rather want us to see you
12	te voie en tant que binaire ^e ?? (...)	as binary ^e ?? (...)
13		
14	E : (...) Si je garde un corps d’homme et une	E: (...) If I keep a man’s body and an androgynous
15	apparence androgyne. Alors me décrire au féminin	appearance. Then describing myself in the feminine is
16	est en quelque sorte me permettre de maintenir un	a way to allow myself to maintain balance. In the
17	équilibre. A défaut de n’avoir plus un corps	absence of having a more androgynous body. I feel
18	androgyne. Je me sens « bicephale ^e . »	‘bicephalous’
19		
20	A : (...) mais en rapport au binaire, si tu définis ton	A: (...) but about the binary, if you defined your
21	genre par des caractères sexués « féminin, masculin,	gender through binary sexed characteristics
22	les deux font partie de chaque être humain » de	‘feminine, masculine, both belong to every human
23	genres binaires comment se dire pas binaire ??? (...)	being’ how can you call yourself not binary??? (...)
24		
25	E : (...) Dans mon cas, je veux exister comme je suis.	E: (...) In my case, I want to exist as I am. I want to
26	Je veux revendiquer d’occuper une place médiane	claim to reside in a median (?), additional (?),
27	(?), supplémentaire (?), complémentaire (?). Pour le	complementary (?) space. For the current binary
28	monde binaire actuel, je pense comme une femme	world, I think like a woman but I have the body of a
29	alors que j’ai le physique d’un homme. (...) Mais sur	man. (...) But as for the binary, I am under the
30	le plan de la binarité, j’ai l’obligation de devoir	obligation to have to express myself using the existing
31	m’exprimer sur base de l’existant binaire. J’ai bien	binary. I want to add a comment everywhere I have to
32	envie de rajouter un commentaire partout où je dois	check the M/F box.
33	cocher la case H/F. (...)	

Alexia’s lack of understanding – whether due to inability or refusal – prompts Emmapeel to assert their identity even further, explaining that no matter how they feel and identify (i.e., “in a median, additional, complementary space,” lines 26–27), they have to fit somehow within the binary world. Emmapeel combines two expressions of duty or necessity in French: *avoir l’obligation de* (‘to be under the obligation’) and *devoir* (‘must’ or ‘to have to’) when they say “j’ai l’obligation de devoir m’exprimer sur base de l’existant binaire” (‘I am under the obligation to have to express myself using the existing binary’). In French, the verb *devoir* also echoes the noun *devoir* (‘duty’), which can also index their belief that it is their

¹⁶ Every example used in this article has been copied exactly from the forum on which it was found and thus contains several spellings or formatings that would be considered as grammatical or syntactical mistakes by some – I decided not to use the expression ‘sic’ for every one of these occurrences so as not to unnecessarily bring the attention of readers to this.

duty to render themselves intelligible for the binary world. Referring to the infamous sex box – *H* for *homme* ('man'), *F* for *femme* ('woman') – which forces everyone into a binary category on a very regular basis, Emmapeel emphasizes once again the obligation they face to fit within one or the other pole of the binary as they “have to check the box” (line 32). Leaving it blank or adding another category is not an option, as they see it, even if they clearly express that desire. Here, and similarly to what Bershtling (2014) has shown in Hebrew, Emmapeel opts for the binary gender opposite to their gender assignment at birth and their likely gender attribution (due to an appearance that may be normatively interpreted as masculine). Their way of finding a non-binary space to exist in within the binary of the French language is to subvert the binary by using the gender that others wouldn't expect, thus rendering both their difference and the problems with the binary visible. By identifying to the unexpected gender and using grammatical gender in non-normative ways, Emmapeel weakens the common belief that it is easy to tell which gender one identifies with.

5.2 Second strategy: reframing, redefining and renaming body parts

On the two forums I have explored, a second strategy used by trans and non-binary people was to reframe, redefine or rename body parts, especially those that are often viewed by society at large as indexes of gender or sex (mainly genitalia). For instance, Nicole87, a trans woman, uses a combination of traditionally “female” terms and traditionally “male” terms, for her surgically unmodified genitals.

Table 2. Nicole87

1	Je ne me ressens pas non plus le besoin de me	I don't feel the need to get rid of my penis either; it
2	débarrasser de mon pénis ; il ne fait pas (plus) horreur :	doesn't horrify me (anymore): it's there, that's it. In
3	il est là, c'est tout. Dans l'intimité, mon épouse et moi-	private, my wife and I talk about my clit, and we're
4	même parlons de mon clito, cela nous va très bien. Il	happy with that. It doesn't work well, and only when
5	fonctionne mal, et seulement quand il veut (...) et ma	it wants to (...) and my chest for example has given
6	poitrine par exemple me donne depuis des années bien	me for years way more pleasure than my weenie. I
7	plus de plaisir que mon zizi. J'ai fini par accepter de	ended up accepting to become neither-nor.
8	devenir ni-ni...	

Nicole87 explains on the i-trans forum that although she does not have a problem with her penis and does not want to get rid of it, she and her wife refers to it as her *clit*, a word usually seen as indexing “femaleness.” Even when using terms traditionally associated with “male” genitalia, Nicole87 does not choose terms one would use in a sexual encounter or to index virility and/or manhood such as *bite* or *queue* ('dick' or 'cock'). Instead, she uses the scientific term available to her, borrowed from medical or educational contexts, *pénis* ('penis', line 2), and a word used by kids to refer to “male” genitalia, *zizi* ('weenie', line 7), which tends to be used in a bathroom context rather than a bedroom one. From the variety of specific body parts comprised within “female” genitalia, Nicole87 selects the one which most resembles the penis in shape and function, that is, the clitoris. The word *clitoris*, however, is often used in a scientific or medical context and wouldn't typically be used in a sexual context, which explains why Nicole87 chooses to shorten it into *clito*. By doing so, Nicole87 does not change the material shape of her body (which only surgery or hormones could do) but she rewrites its social reality, transforming her body parts into ones indexing femaleness or femininity, instead of having to neutralize her gender identity every time she enters the bedroom with her wife. Similarly, Nicole87 uses the word *poitrine* (literally 'chest' but mostly used to describe women's chests as the word *torse* would be most common to talk about men's chests) to sexualize and feminize her body.

This linguistic strategy has been used with great frequency on the second forum, ftm-transsexuel, as well, but the trans men on this forum have done it somewhat differently; in addition to renaming body parts, they have also reframed or redefined them so that the same word used by the rest of society to index “female” genitalia, for instance, can now be used to index “male” genitalia. While Nicole87 uses *clito* to

describe her genitalia, she does not necessarily describe penises as belonging to a category of “female” genitalia. The trans men encountered on the second forum not only use terms such as *micro-penis* but also reframe vaginas as being “male” body parts. Indeed, three of them – Klaive, Bluepoppy and mark – were fairly active on a thread discussing vaginal penetration and whether using one’s vagina during a sexual encounter was antithetical to one’s transmasculine gender identity. Klaive, Bluepoppy and mark all agree on the fact that having a vagina and using it for sexual satisfaction does not mean one is a woman, and all three use several instances of this linguistic strategy of renaming or reframing to redefine their genitalia (and by extension any trans man’s genitalia) using male language. Klaive, for instance, explains that he redefined his body parts as a teenager, even before admitting to himself that he was trans.

Table 3a. Klaive

1	Quand j'étais ado j'ai réglé le problème sans vraiment	When I was a teenager ^c , I solved that issue without
2	oser m'avouer que j'étais trans en me disant que j'avais	daring admit to myself I was trans by telling myself I
3	"un micro-pénis", que les hommes de naissance ont	had 'a micro-penis,' that men at birth sometimes have
4	parfois cette malchance, que je ne pouvais pénétrer	this misfortune, that I couldn't penetrate anyone but
	personne mais que j'avais un autre pénis intérieur.	that I had another inside penis.

Here, Klaive transforms two body parts traditionally seen as indexing femaleness into penises; first, he turns his clitoris into a micro-penis, explaining and normalizing its small size by comparing it to the small penis some cis men have as well. Klaive does lament the fact that he cannot penetrate anyone with it (and may here index a desire to fulfill a normative male sexual role) but then adds that he has something cis men with a micro-penis do not have: another inside penis (*autre pénis intérieur*, line 5). Klaive here reframes his genitals as an inside-out penis and presents it as a “bonus,” as something additional that cis men might not have, and which may compensate for his inability to penetrate (cf. Edelman and Zimman 2014). Later, Klaive continues to frame his genitals as a personal specificity – rather than an indicator of membership in a sex or gender category – but also redefines them as “male” so that they can index his gender identity.

Table 3b. Klaive

1	Voir ça comme une sorte de "particularité"	Seeing it [one's genitals] as a kind of personal
2	personnelle, des parties génitales masculines mais qui	'particularity,' as male genitals that 'tend to be
3	"ont tendance à être perçues dans notre société"	perceived in our society' as female characteristics.
4	comme des caractères féminins.	

In this example, Klaive breaks the essentializing link that is often created between one’s genitals and one’s sex or gender and recreates his own truth. By stating that vaginas are in some cases male genitals and that they are only “perceived” to be female characteristics in “our society,” Klaive takes the vagina = female / penis = male dichotomy, which is often framed as a natural truth, and turns it into a social construct or a cultural perspective. This helps him deconstruct the essentializing powers one’s genitals normatively can have over one’s gender identity and reframes the truth of one’s body, sex, and gender as something personal instead of a social or communal concept. From this perspective, trans men are right to describe their genitals as male because they have complete authority over the truths of their bodies. On the other hand, society is wrong to apply its perspective onto everyone regardless of one’s “personal particularities.” Similarly, Bluepoppy replies to the thread adding that having a vagina shouldn’t be seen as determining one’s body as female but could be instead seen as an “addition” beyond a cis man’s body.

Table 4. Bluepoppy

1	Peut-être (...) que ce pourrait être (...) un vagin visualisé	Maybe (...) it could be (...) a vagina visualized as
2	comme "en plus" et non pas vécu comme déterminisme	"in addition" and not lived as determining the
3	féminin du corps...	body as female.

Here, Bluepoppy also breaks the essentializing link often created between genitalia and gender/sex, framing genitals as non-indexical of gender or sex. One could even argue looking at this example that Bluepoppy's definition of vaginas as *en plus* ('in addition', line 2) could also refer to the meaning of the French noun *un plus* which means 'a positive,' suggesting that having a vagina does not prevent a trans man from being a man, but in reality makes him a better man. Klaive and Bluepoppy similarly define trans men not as lacking anything but as having an additional body feature. This also counters the widespread assumption in society that vaginas are a lack of penis. In response to this thread, mark flips around the idea that genitals are indexical of gender or sex and implies that it is one's gender identity which informs about one's genitals.

Table 5. mark

1	Ça me parle complètement ce que tu dis, (...), je suis	What you're saying completely speaks to me, (...),
2	vraiment dans ce rapport au corps de type "j'ai un vagin	I am really in that relation with my body like "I have
3	en plus, par rapport à un corps de mec cis". Après mon	an added vagina compared to the body of a cis
4	dicklit est pas super développé et il est "retré" donc ça	dude." I mean, my dicklit is not really developed
5	me complexe un peu, mais j'adore la pénétration	and it is "retracted" so it makes me a little self-
6	vaginale. Par contre je n'ai pas de chéri depuis un	conscious but I love vaginal penetration. I don't
7	moment mais j'en ai déjà parlé avec un pote gay (cis) et	have a boyfriend right now but I talked about it with
8	il m'a tenu le discours du "y'a un trou en plus, pourquoi	a (cis) gay friend and he told me "there's a bonus
9	pas, c'est un corps d'homme point barre".	hole, why not, it's a man's body, period."

In this example, mark agrees with seeing his vagina as a plus or a bonus. Including the perspective of his cis gay friend about his vagina not only validates his genitals as indeed desirable, but also subverts the idea that genitals are indexical of gender or sex. Mark's friend tells him that by being a man, he has a man's body, and this should be the end of the conversation. By doing so, mark's friend here sees gender identity as an index of your body parts: if you're a woman, your body parts are female body parts; if you're a man, then your body parts are male body parts. This counters the idea that genitals usually index sex/gender and turns them into any other body part. Vaginas here become similar to elbows, lungs or noses and can belong to a man or a woman. In this example, mark also uses *dicklit* to refer to his genitals, thus borrowing the English neologism composed of *dick* and *clit* which has been used by trans men to refer to their clitorises as they become enlarged by the use of testosterone. Mark does lament the size of his *dicklit*, which could be seen by some as the expression of a penis envy, but through the use of this neologism, mark does define his body part as a kind of dick, which thus does not make it any different from any cis man lamenting the size of his penis. Throughout all these examples, the trans men on the forum clearly counter the normative medical discourses surrounding them which usually do not include trans bodies and experiences.

5.3 Third strategy: use of English terminology

The last example above also contains the use of the third linguistic strategy defined in this article: the borrowing of English terms, especially neologisms specifically created by the English-speaking trans and non-binary communities. Members of both forums, whether identifying as trans men, trans women or non-binary individuals, all used English terms to talk about specific trans embodied practices, trans body parts, and in one occurrence even used an English-looking identity category which is not actually attested in English. Ananas35, for instance, states on ftm-transsexual: *Je ne supporte pas de mettre un binder* ('I can't stand wearing a binder'), borrowing the English term to talk about devices used to flatten one's chest. What

is interesting here is that the spelling of the word is not changed to represent its phonetic pronunciation (/baindœr/), even though the –ER ending in French is pronounced /e/ and the spelling used to represent the French sounds closest to the –ER ending in English, /œr/, is –EUR. Interestingly as well, the Quebec equivalent of the French Académie, the Office québécois de la langue française, has coined an expression in French and translated the word binder into *debardeur à compression thoracique* (‘thoracic compression tank-top’), although it seems to be rarely used by French-speaking trans communities in reality.

A similar analysis could be done with the English word *packer*, often borrowed in French without having its spelling changed. The data also include another very interesting linguistic borrowing on the same topic of packing devices. Talking about packers and prosthetics on *ftm-transsexuel*, Dobby explains the functions of two new products he has recently encountered online. In English, an *STP*, or *stand-to-pee*, is a device that allows someone without a penis to urinate standing.

Table 6. Dobby

1	L'entreprise a été fondée par un mec trans (...) et	The company was created by a trans guy (...) and they
2	ils proposent deux types de prothèses; les 2 en 1 qui	offer two types of prosthetics; the 2-in-1 which acts as a
3	font packer et stp, et les 4 en 1 qui font tout ce dont	packer and STP, and the 4-in-1 which is everything we
4	on pourrait espérer d'une prothèse.	can hope for a prosthetics.

Here, Dobby explains that one of the packers can also act as an STP, which is the acronym widely used in the English-speaking trans community to describe that a packer can also be used to pee while standing. The English acronym would already only be understandable by an insider in English, but the borrowing of this acronym in French seems even harder to understand, given that the French acronym *STP* (or *stp*) already exists and is used quite commonly as a shortened version of *s'il te plait* (the informal ‘please’). These examples of *binder*, *packer*, *stp*, and *dicklit*, all borrowed from English, are also sometimes accompanied by the use of English-sounding words that do not exist in English, as in the following sentence written by Nadya, the admin of the *i-trans* forum, in response to a quite transphobic message from a new member (who in short wrote, using a slur, that he was looking for a trans prostitute).

Table 7. Nadya

1	Ensuite tu es sur un forum trans, il y a ici des mecs et	Also, you are on a trans forum, here there are guys,
2	des nana et même des no-genders	girls, and even no-genders.

Nadya challenges the new poster’s use of transphobic slurs and describes who the members of her forum are, listing their genders. In addition to the two genders of the binary (*des mecs et des nana*), Nadya wishes to add a third category, which we could assume was designed to include non-binary people. Instead of using an existing category in French (*non-binaire* or *agenre*, for example) or borrowing an existing English word (*genderless*, *non-binary*, or *agender*, for instance), Nadya creates her own English term, whose use is unattested in English-speaking trans communities. In all these examples, the use of English is so widely accepted as a strategy that it is used regardless of the specific situation at hand (spellings not matching the pronunciation, possible confusion with another French word or acronym, or borrowing of an inexistent English word). We could thus wonder why the French-speaking trans community resorts to borrowing from English so easily, especially faced with the ever-present policing of the Académie against the use of foreign words in French. In addition, such a widespread use of English borrowings instead of the coining of French neologisms could point towards the fact that, despite both linguistic strategies being criticized by the French Académie, borrowing a word is still seen by speakers as more acceptable than creating a word (even in situations where coining a French word wouldn’t be that difficult, for example with *clitobite* instead of *dicklit*). Word creations, when they are to happen, should probably occur in English instead of French, as Nadya exemplifies with her use of the English-sounding neologism *no-genders*. Looking at my preliminary results and seeing the invention of a new English word *no-gender* in French, a

colleague also voiced the hypothesis that English could be on its way to become the “language of trans” or the “language of non-binary,” which is an idea worth exploring, as it also poses questions of discursive or epistemological colonization from the Anglo-American Global North onto trans lives in other languages and cultures.

6 Conclusion

Although not explicitly stating so, the French-speaking trans people I have encountered on both forums examined here seem to have reclaimed a sense of linguistic authority and self-determination through several of their actions and despite several policing and gatekeeping bodies: the gender binary, the French Académie, the essentializing medical discourse, society at large, and even parts of the trans community itself. Members of the forums have subverted the rules of grammatical gender in French by using the binary in non-normative ways or using the unexpected gender. They have resisted normative discourses about body parts – especially genitals – and have created their own counter-discourses to deconstruct genitals as indexes of sex or gender. They have resisted the position of the Académie against using English and have in some cases reclaimed their right to create new words or give new meanings to existing words. And finally, they also have been resisting gatekeeping discourses within their own community (as represented by binary trans people for example). All of this would seem to prove what others have found in English and other binary languages; trans and non-binary people exist in any language and will show great creativity and innovation in navigating the many obstacles that are placed between them and using language to express who they truly are.

Acknowledgments. I want to thank Lal Zimman for his extensive comments and feedback on prior versions of this article as well as all the students in his Language and Gender Transgression seminar where the initial data for this article was presented and workshopped. Many thanks as well to the reviewer for their generative comments and feedback.

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