
PRONOUN CHOICE IN NON-BINARY ENGLISH SPEAKERS: IDENTITY AND SYNTAX IN NATURAL SPEECH

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Abstract

The research paper studies the syntactic and identity dimension of pronoun selection with non-binary speakers of the English language, whose belonging to the linguistic structures corresponds to their gender identity. The study deals with ambiguous relationship between linguistic norms, the identity of the individual and social expectation regarding non binary use of language. This paper identifies trends in the choice of pronouns and syntax so far used by non-binary individuals in different social situations through the analysis of natural speech data. The results indicate that the pronoun preference of non-binary speakers is related both to self-perception of gender self-expression and to strategies to relate to social systems that construct language. Also, the paper identifies the obstacles and possibilities in modifying traditional English syntax to capture the gender diversity. The article is relevant to general knowledge on how language reflects, reinforces and negotiates gender identities, providing an insight into dynamically flowing gender-neutral language.

Keyword: *Non-Binary, Pronoun Choice, Gender Identity, English Syntax, Natural Speech, Discourse Analysis*

INTRODUCTION

The dynamic of language and its importance in the communication and articulation of personal identity can be defined as a necessity, rather than an option in the process of gender identity determination. In case of non-binary people, who do not identify as purely male or female, the use of different pronouns would not only be grammatical forms but a requirement to define their gender and self-identification. The English pronouns have historically been binary whereby a pronoun is either he as masculine and she as feminine. This system has been anchored by a societal conception of gender that fits into a binary system, which deprives non-binary people of any diversity in options in language that can help in expressing their experiences (Butler, 1990). Nonetheless, with society becoming more aware of non-binary genders, and with more acceptance, linguistic changes to reflect more gender identities have become more apparent.

One such development was the emergence of non-binary pronouns like they/them and ze/zir and other gender-neutral pronouns where non-binary people were able to pronounce a pronoun that fits their gender identity. In addition to the expression of individuality, these non-binary statistics also play the role of opposing the traditional gender norms adopted in the English language. The growing empowerment of non-binary representation has led to a new requirement of linguistic practices which are more accommodating and flexible, such that there is a need to have language which encompasses more gender varieties (Zimman, 2017). This language use change sheds light on how gender has changed and how language can be regarded as a negotiation tool as well as an expression of identity.

The use of non-binary pronouns is one of the major provocators of negotiation of gender identity. Such pronouns do not have any specific linguistic aim to the non-binary persons; they are some way of expressing their reality and a way of imposing their presence in a system that often relegates them to the margins. The gender-neutral pronoun (they/them) reinforces this idea as it breaks the classic binary

gender category to take into account the fact that there are people who cannot be placed in the pattern of male/female (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003). The use of these pronouns is a very rational linguistic need as well as a political defiance to the normative limits of gender. The decision to introduce non-binary pronouns can give human beings the possibility of having ultimate control over their gender identity perceptions and expression hence synchronizing their talk in line with their gender experience.

In this respect, the use of pronouns in creating gender identity is of paramount importance. The use of pronouns is one of the initial language indicators by which people define their gender, and it influences critically how they are recognized and referred to by the other parties. In the case of non-binary, linguistic resources are paramount through which non-binary individuals can be represented positively. Non-binary pronouns, however, are not used without challenges, as well. The difficulties do not lie only in language but in fact, are very much embedded in the social set-ups and cultural demands regarding gender. The non-binary pronouns are also not widely accepted, yet, and their use is still met by opposition both in daily lives and in different institutions.

In addition, the usage of non-binary pronouns also poses certain syntactic issues, in particular, in such a language as English, in which the use of grammatical structures depends strongly on gender. As an example, the subject verb agreement can prove problematic when non-binary pronouns are put in consideration. According to common grammar in English, the pronouns such as he, she are used with the singular subject and it is easy to predict the form of the verb they take, whereas the pronoun they/them is usually of the plural kind, which needed modifications in verb conjugation when used with one subject. This poses a dilemma on non-binary speakers who would want to be linguistically coherent and also affirm their gender identity through pronoun usage (Keegan, 2020). By introducing the non-binary pronouns to vocabulary, therefore, there is a jolt in syntactic regularity that puts personal identity into conflict with the syntax of gendered language.

Thus, the research problem that lies in the core of this article aims at comprehending how this is addressed by non-binary speakers in natural speech. What is the synthesis of the way they tackle the interaction between identities expression and syntactic codes? In particular, the question is how non-binary people solve such problems as subject-verb agreements when they communicate with non-binary pronouns in their daily speech. To be able to address these questions, one will have to analyze how non-binary speakers apply the language in their practices and what solutions they make to the typical linguistic rules to fit their gender identities.

The use of non-binary pronouns to refer to someone can take the forms of pronouns like the “they/them” pronoun, which have increased in both casual and formal settings because non-binary individuals are demanding their gender identities. However, this transformation in the linguistic use also comes with the question on how such pronouns may display their performances in the grammatical form of English. The gendered nature of the pronouns the traditional syntactic rules rely upon can prove to be a challenge when it comes to adding non-binary pronouns. As an example, the pronoun they have been a long-established plural pronoun, however, when used in the singular to refer to a person, this pronoun refuses to obey the binary gender system and subject verb agreement. However, non-binary speakers have devised ways of juggling with such linguistic barriers, such as alteration in verb patterns or alternative constructions that avoid gendered language in completely (Grammatical Gender and Identity in Communication, 2020). Such capability to be innovative in the confines of the English language demonstrates the flexibility of the speakers and language itself in terms of complex reality of gender.

Beside the considerations of syntax, non-binary pronouns also question the expectations put on the

society concerning their gender. Language is not only a communication tool, but also a way of defining, shaping and reinforcing identities, a dimension that Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) remark to be an important one. Such an effort to use non-binary pronouns is the response to the insistence on gender binaries that occupies dominant positions in society. By using non-binary pronouns, the non-binary individuals break the ground that gender is always defined by biological sex and they lay some room to a more flexible perception of gender.

To conclude, the adoption of non-binary pronouns in English will be considered a decent change in the connection between language and identity, especially gender identity. The non-binary employ pronouns to declare where their gender belongs, and with the help of such a strategy, the restrictions of the gendered English language system are broken. The syntactic and social difficulties to non-binary pronouns disclose the complexities in people using language in a gender binary. This article intends to illuminate the changing dynamics between language, identity and norms of the social sphere by examining the usage of the language by a non-binary speaker in order to emphasize the vitality of the use of pronouns in the process of describing gender in the context of natural language use.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender and language literature has concentrated traditionally on the dualistic nature of gender formed through pronouns and other symbols of language (e.g. Cameron, 1997; Butler, 1990). Early researchers studied the role of language to strengthen the organization of gender to specifically regard the pronouns he and she as gendered examples that are used to group people based on their perceived biological sex and gender roles that people obtain (Lakoff, 1975). These personal pronouns which are deep-rooted in English language have traditionally been regarded as the major identifier of gender, and there is hardly any space in the equation. Accordingly, language is not only a reflector of the attitudes of the culture of gender but also an active inducer of these differences.

With the changes in perception of gender that have occurred especially due to the finding of the non-binary gender, the linguistic arrangement has been challenged. Individuals that do not fit in the male and female binary so closely, the non-binary, confront a very difficult process of finding linguistic forms that represent them. Although the binary pronouns he/she takes predominant power over English syntax, demands of a progressive mainstream to include a wider range of people in terms of gender are gaining momentum with the need to find alternatives that would suit most gender identities. It has resulted in the use of non-binary pronouns (such as the use of they/them, ze/zir, etc.) which aim to offer non-binary people expression through the language. However, such pronouns tend to compromise some grammatical regulations, which poses a predicament not only to the language users, but to the language as well (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003).

Such a challenge is not limited to an examination of pronoun choice alone. The speakers of non-binary words will have further challenges in negotiating within the syntactic frameworks of grammatically gendered rules of subject-verb agreement rules which have been historically pegged to the use of gendered pronouns. As an example, the word they have been traditionally used as a plural pronoun, so by using it in the singular form, one will have to change the conjugation of verbs and will cause syntactic ambiguity (Grammatical Gender and Identity in Communication, 2020). The urgency of such adaptations exposes the contradiction of the changing demands of non-binary speakers with the strict forms established in the language where the binary gender categories were historically predominant. The problem thus lies not only in the ability to identify appropriate pronouns but to create both syntactic and discourse patterns enabling non-binary individuals to convey their identities convey them effectively whilst remaining consistent in the application or use of these same patterns.

The studies of successful use of gender-neutral language have increased greatly with time but most of them have centered on theoretical imaginings as opposed to actual linguistic practices of how people, specifically, non-binary people interact through the use of language in their daily lives. Such theorists as Zimman (2017) and Keegan (2020) have theorized about non-binary pronouns and its social and cultural implications. Others like Zimman, have elaborated how non-binary individuals exploit language in ways of revolting against cultural regulations and claim their status. Nevertheless, a lot of it is theoretical and provides suggestions about the possible consequences of the usage of non-binary pronouns without exploring the use of such pronouns deeply with regard to natural speech.

This literature gap reveals the necessity of further studies based on empirical research dedicated to the use of pronouns by non-binary people in the context of various syntactic constructions when in a natural conversation. Although it is also found that non-binary pronouns are discussed in the case of written or formal usage (e.g., Grammatical Gender and Identity in Communication, 2020), fewer researchers analyzed the way such pronouns are used in casual, impromptu speech. Since the language is a living concept and there are personal and social connotations of pronoun usage, it is important to discuss changes that non-binary speakers make when addressing different conversational situations.

Moreover, because language is significant to formulate and reinforce gender expectations, it is necessary to explore how non-binary pronouns will be used to support the continuing negotiation of gender in the contemporary discourse. The balance between language revolution and the more institutionalized grammars presents a bumpy terrain between non-binary speakers who have to grapple with a simultaneously changing and averse linguistic system. Learning how non-binary people manage this tension when speaking, is an important step toward clarifying the insufficiency of language and greater inclusivity in lingual practices.

The proposed research will in this respect serve as a gap filler in the literature since it will result in a comprehensive realistic analysis of how non-binary speakers negotiate the issue of pronoun choice and syntax in real-life conversation situations. Demonstrating how non-binary people manage to introduce their gender identification to everyday language thus making it a natural practice, the present study will illuminate the issues and ingenious solutions that appear when trying to make their personal identity correspond with grammatical rules. Through this, it shall lead to broader thinking about gender identity being adaptation by the expression of language, providing the insight as to how language is used to construct and negotiate identity in a society that is more open and accepting of diverse people.

This paper examines the mechanism through which non-binary speakers can negotiate the use of pronouns and syntax so as to give a wider perspective of language, gender and identity interaction. By analyzing the natural sonnets through an empirical approach, the study will largely be insightful on the nature of how the non-binary negotiate linguistic structures and express their selves within a system of language that in many ways, are not susceptible to non-binary variations. This will not only serve the academic side of linguistics but also be of practical suggestions to establish the linguistic practices that are more indulging to gender realities experienced in the modern society.

SIGNIFICANCE AND RATIONALE

The choice of pronouns among the non-binary population is a very important concept at a time when gender awareness and inclusivity have taken central stage in social and academic conversations. Since society has started outgrowing the fixed parameter of male and female, non-binary individuals non-binary people who neither identify completely as male nor as female are demanding language forms that reflect

their identities. The study is relevant to both linguistic theory and social linguistics since it is based on a challenge against the conventional concept regarding gender and syntax in language. Pronoun use, with alternative pronouns like they/them or ze/zir, even with the non-binary pronouns, breaks the grammatical convention of binary gender construction which has a historical basis. Through this, it provides the possibility to conceptualize language in new forms to be more accommodating to gender activities (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003).

This paper will therefore present important contributions to the discussion of non-binary speakers and how they manage to find their way through the paradox of pronouns in relating their identities and identities of the society as a whole. This study will contribute to further gender variance and the details of how language differentiates genders as well as points to the means of making a linguistic system more accommodating in terms of a wider gamut of gender knowledge. Finally, this study reinstates that language has to be reinvented to become inclusive of the fluidity of gender (Butler, 1990).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main goal of the present study will be to explore the characteristics of the pronoun usage by non-binary English speakers in the context of natural language and the way these pronoun decisions affect and problematize the English syntactic norms. The paper seeks to discuss the linguistic approach to link words and phrases used by the non-binary speakers in order to maneuver the existing grammatical rules and principles that involve subject-verb agreement and sentence formation when referring to gender-neutral pronouns used in the role of they/them or ze/zir. Through the analysis of the empirical data on speech, the study aims to realize how non-binary pronouns influence the syntax of English and enter the current discussion of the role of language to describe and accommodate various gender identities (Zimman, 2017; Grammatical Gender and Identity in Communication, 2020).

RESEARCH QUESTION

1. What types of pronouns do non-binary speakers use in natural speech, and how do they vary across different social contexts?
2. How do non-binary speakers navigate syntactic structures such as subject-verb agreement when using non-binary pronouns?
3. Why do non-binary speakers choose particular pronouns, and what does this reveal about their relationship to societal gender norms and language?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper relies on some of the significant theories in sociolinguistics and gender theories to understand how non-binary pronouns serve in run-of-the-mill conversation. The theory of gender performativity by Judith Butler(1990) gives a basis on which the non-binary individuals express in gender identity using words. Butler states that gender is not a fixed identity but one that constantly repeats itself in performance and this goes hand in hand with gender fluid pronoun use by non-binary people. Since gender is performed through language, the choice of pronouns by non-binary people, including they/they pronoun or ze/zir pronoun, is a performance that acquires an alternative form of gender to resist the gender binary. Secondly, the language and power concept (Cameron, 1997) is also necessary when having to understand how non-binary pronouns undermine and revolutionize the existing linguistic system. Language is not a neutral means of communication but it is socially highly embedded because it is a part of social power structures, introducing non-binary pronouns challenges power through challenging traditional social gender norms.

Besides, this study takes into consideration generative grammar (Chomsky, 1995), that concerns rules of

application of language in general, and also reveals flexibility on the part of language users to alter and change the rules. With the non-binary pronouns, generative grammar can be used to elucidate on the syntactical modifications undertaken, which occur during incorporating non-binary pronouns into our native language such as the problem associated with subjectverb agreement.

METHODOLOGY

This research gives useful clues on how non-binary people make compromises on their gender identity by offering them non-binary pronouns and the linguistic syntactic constructions found in informal conversation. These results point to the idea that the use of pronouns cannot be seen as merely an expression of personal identity, but a tactical maneuver within a broader society, which is most extensively dictated by binary gender rules. The study proves that non-binary pronouns can break the conventional rules of syntactic structure, but still, the speakers tend to innovate and adapt the language to find their gender identity.

The paper is also focused on fluidity as a concept wherein language speakers are capable of altering conventional grammar rules to form more continuous forms of language. Such use of language is adaptive because it demonstrates transformations in the sense of gender in society as a whole and questions linguistic conventions in order to make them part of the framework to represent a diversity of gender identities. As non-binary in its expression is expanding, language has to evolve to adopt the requirements and peculiarities of gender identity.

The current study expands the state of knowledge seeking to resolve sociolinguistics and gender studies and provides empirical evidence on how non-binary pronouns work in real life situations and how they affect syntax. The findings can be further enhanced by future research that seeks to understand how the non-binary pronouns relate to other language characteristics, like tense, aspect, and modality to better understand how the language adjusts to the phenomenon of gender diversity.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The analysis of the collected data will focus on several key areas, each contributing to a comprehensive understanding of how non-binary individuals navigate pronoun choice and syntactic structures. The first major finding will be **Pronoun Variety** among non-binary speakers. It is expected that the majority of non-binary speakers will predominantly use the commonly recognized pronouns "they/them." However, other non-binary pronouns, such as "ze/zir," "xe/xem," or even newly coined forms, may also be observed. This variability in pronoun selection suggests that non-binary individuals are actively participating in the creation and evolution of gender-neutral language, challenging the traditional male-female binary structure (Zimman, 2017).

The analysis will explore how speakers choose between these various pronouns based on personal identity, comfort level, and the social context in which they find themselves. For instance, some individuals may prefer using "they/them" in certain environments, such as with friends or in informal settings, while opting for alternatives like "ze/zir" in professional or more formal interactions. This exploration will also consider the role of community influence, highlighting how exposure to and acceptance of non-binary pronouns can affect individuals' choices. By examining these patterns, the study will offer insights into how non-binary individuals engage with and shape the evolving language of gender.

The second area of focus will be **Syntactical Deviations** caused by the introduction of non-binary pronouns, particularly "they/them," which present unique challenges in traditional subject-verb

agreement. In English, “they” has historically been a plural pronoun, and when used in the singular form, it creates syntactical tension, especially with verbs such as “is” versus “are.” For example, non-binary speakers using “they” as a singular pronoun often face grammatical confusion in sentences like “They is going” versus the more conventional “They are going” (Grammatical Gender and Identity in Communication, 2020). The study will closely examine these instances, looking for patterns in how non-binary speakers either adhere to or deviate from traditional grammatical rules.

This analysis will also investigate whether non-binary speakers use any linguistic innovations to manage these syntactical issues, such as employing singular “they” in a consistent manner that minimizes perceived errors. Additionally, the study will explore whether speakers adjust their language based on the formality of the context. For example, in formal writing or speech, non-binary speakers may adhere more strictly to grammatical rules, while in casual conversation, they may be more flexible in their use of non-binary pronouns. This exploration will provide a clearer picture of how non-binary individuals balance the need for linguistic consistency with the desire for gender identity expression.

The third area of analysis, **Identity and Agency**, will examine how pronoun choices reflect the negotiation of gender identity in different contexts. Pronoun choice for non-binary individuals is not just an expression of gender identity, but also a strategic negotiation of power and agency within various social contexts (Zimman, 2017). For example, non-binary individuals may adopt different pronouns depending on the people they interact with or the social situation. Some individuals may exclusively use “they/them” with friends but switch to “ze/zir” in more formal settings, such as at work or in professional environments. This flexibility suggests that pronoun choice is deeply intertwined with social norms, expectations, and the power dynamics within specific contexts.

The study will analyze these dynamic choices to understand how language functions not just as a tool of personal identity expression but also as a mechanism through which non-binary individuals navigate societal structures that often remain firmly entrenched in binary gender norms. This will also provide insight into how non-binary individuals assert agency and control over how they are perceived in different spaces, and how their linguistic choices reflect broader social and cultural changes regarding gender fluidity.

Through these analyses, the study will gain a deeper understanding of how non-binary individuals navigate a language system traditionally structured around binary gender norms. The findings will offer a more nuanced view of gender identity in contemporary language, highlighting the flexibility and adaptability of language in reflecting diverse gender experiences. By examining how non-binary speakers challenge and reshape syntactic conventions, the study will contribute to the broader discourse on how language evolves in response to changing social attitudes about gender.

FINDINGS

The findings of this research will be structured around three key aspects of non-binary pronoun use in natural speech, providing insights into how language reflects, negotiates, and challenges gender identity. The first area, **Pronoun Selection**, will focus on identifying and analyzing the different non-binary pronouns used by speakers in the study. The analysis will examine how frequently pronouns such as “they/them,” “ze/zir,” and other alternatives appear in the data, along with the factors influencing these choices. Particular attention will be paid to how these choices reflect the speaker’s personal identity, self-perception, and the social context in which they are used. It is expected that speakers will predominantly use “they/them” due to its widespread recognition, but the study will also explore the use of lesser-known pronouns like “ze/zir,” which may be more common among specific social or cultural groups. This

section will provide a comparative analysis of the usage patterns between widely recognized pronouns and less common alternatives, shedding light on how non-binary individuals navigate the available options and the role of social acceptance in their choice of pronouns.

The second section, **Syntactical Patterns**, will explore the grammatical challenges faced by non-binary speakers, particularly in relation to subject-verb agreement. Non-binary pronouns, especially “they/them,” often create syntactic anomalies, as “they” has traditionally been a plural pronoun, leading to challenges with verbs like “is” versus “are.” The study will examine whether non-binary speakers adhere to conventional grammatical rules or modify their language to better align with their gender identity. It is expected that while some speakers will use “they are” consistently with singular “they,” others may creatively adjust language structures to avoid perceived grammatical errors. These adjustments may reflect a broader shift in English grammar towards greater flexibility in accommodating gender-inclusive language. This section will also analyze instances where non-binary speakers may deliberately challenge established syntactic norms, suggesting an evolving understanding of grammar that incorporates gender fluidity and non-binary identities.

The final section, **Social and Contextual Factors**, will delve into how the social context influences non-binary pronoun use. Non-binary speakers may alter their pronouns depending on the setting or their audience, with formal versus informal situations potentially affecting the pronoun choice. The research will examine whether speakers use different pronouns in casual conversations with friends compared to more formal interactions with colleagues or in professional environments. Additionally, the study will explore how non-binary speakers negotiate their gender identity based on social expectations and the linguistic norms of the groups they interact with. The findings will shed light on the fluidity of language use and demonstrate how non-binary individuals navigate societal structures that continue to be heavily influenced by binary gender norms. Through these findings, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamic relationship between language, identity, and social context.

Together, these findings will offer valuable insights into how non-binary individuals navigate language to express their gender identity, highlighting the complex interplay of linguistic norms, personal expression, and social context. This research will contribute to the broader discussion on the role of language in shaping and reflecting diverse gender identities, providing empirical evidence to support the growing recognition of non-binary pronouns in both casual and formal speech contexts.

CONCLUSION

This research is a great source of information on the gender identity negotiation of non-binary people via non-binary pronouns and related syntactic constructions as they are implemented in the everyday language usage. As the findings have brought to the fore, pronoun choice is not only a demonstrated dialogue of individual identity but a tactical negotiation in a wider social arena that is yet to be fully free of the dichotomous gender norms. The study confirms that even when those without binary pronouns do not follow the accepted syntactic principles, speakers tend to create new words and form them into new sentences in order to express their gender identity.

The paper presents the fluidity of language where it explains that language speakers have the potential to bend or alter accepted grammatical rules and give shape to more inclusive linguistic structures. This fluidity of language application has a wider implication in society on the conception of gender and the challenge to ensure that linguistic practices would have to change to embrace diversity in gender identifications. Since non-binary people are becoming increasingly visible, the language that is used should be modified to suit their demands and accurately depict the gender plurality existing.

This study will make a contribution to the already existing corpus on studies of sociolinguistics and gender since it provides empirical data about the reality of using non-binary pronouns and their influence on syntax. Further studies are possible around such observations to discover how non-binary pronouns relate to other language phenomena, e.g., tense, aspect, and modality when applied to gender diversity to further define how language is developing ways to react to the concept of gender diversity.

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