"You Used 'Elle,' So Now You're a Girl": Discursive Possibilities for a Non-Binary Teenager in French Class

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Non-binary individuals comprise one third of the transgender population and may be especially vulnerable to marginalization. The study of languages such as French, grammatically based in a binary gender system, offers unique challenges to non-binary learners for representing themselves in accordance with their identity. Grounded in a poststructuralist understanding of identity (Butler, 1990; Norton Peirce, 1995; Weedon, 1987), this exploratory case study employs discourse analysis (Blommaert, 2005) to delve into the experiences of a non-binary high school student of French. What subject positions are imposed on the student through the discursive systems of English and French, and how is the student able to assert alternative positions? Findings demonstrate the varied and strategic linguistic constitution of the student's identity based on factors including linguistic resources and social positioning, illustrating the student's agency, creativity, and resilience. Implications for teachers are discussed, including the harm caused by misgendering and recommendations for gender-expansive pedagogies.

Approximately one third of transgender people, whose gender differs from their sex assigned at birth, identify outside of the gender binary (James, et al., 2016). Individuals who are *non-binary*[1] identify as neither exclusively male nor exclusively female, and may use terms such as *genderqueer, gender-fluid*, *agender, bigender, pangender, two-spirit, neutrois, demiboy, demigirl,* or other or no terms, to describe their identities. Though non-binary individuals are typically grouped under the umbrella term *transgender*, many do not identify as trans. Non-binary identities present challenges to existing paradigms and call for the inclusion of new perspectives in applied linguistics research, yet they have remained largely invisible in research on queer language learners (e.g., King, 2008; Moore, 2016; Nelson, 2010; Nguyen & Yang, 2015).

This invisibility is dire given the vulnerability of transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) teenagers to bullying, marginalization, and negative mental health effects (Kahn et al., 2018). Many of these experiences are broadly associated with language, or the ways in which individuals are classified, named, and referred to. Only one in five trans students is referred to with their correct pronouns at school (Kahn et al., 2018), a symbolic action that carries dire consequences. Trans youth who are habitually *misgendered*, referred to with a name or pronoun that conflicts with their gender identity, attempt suicide at twice the rate of those whose chosen names and pronouns are respected (The Trevor Project, 2020). Over 40% of TGNC students face gender-based discrimination at school and over half are forced to miss school because they feel unsafe (Kosciw et al., 2018). Research focused specifically on non-binary teenagers suggests that they are at equal or greater risk compared to their male- or female-identified transgender peers. Non-binary teenagers report one of the highest stress levels among LGBTQIA+[2] youth overall (Harrison et al., 2012). 83% of non-binary adults report experiencing harassment in K-12

schools, a higher rate than transgender people identifying as male or female (Harrison et al., 2012). In a study of transgender and cisgender adolescents, Toomey et al. (2018) found that non-binary adolescents reported the second-highest rate of suicide attempts of any group at 41.8%, second only to transgender girls.

The impact of misgendering can be understood through the lens of microaggressions, or "everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership" (Sue, 2010, p. 3). Nadal et al. (2012) identify misgendering as one of 12 persistent microaggressions experienced by TGNC adults. Simpson and Dewaele (2019) argue that context and intent play a role in the impact of misgendering. They present a taxonomy of seven types of misgendering according to speaker intentions, including "aggressive or 'political' misgendering," in which the speaker "intends to embarrass or 'out' the referred-to individual, to deny the validity of the person's expected gender reference, and/or to deny the validity of gender transition" and "mixed-perception misgendering," in which the speaker "unconsciously uses the wrong gender reference with no intent to do so" and "may therefore be embarrassed by their unintended error" (p. 105). Regardless of intention, the negative impact of misgendering has been consistently expressed through testimonies and research; it is a repetitive experience which serves to "diminish transgender persons' self- respect [and] limit the discursive resources at their disposal" (Kapusta, 2016, p. 502). For trans and non-binary individuals, misgendering negatively impacts mental health: it correlates negatively with an individual's affect, self-evaluation, and self-esteem (McLemore, 2015) and can lead to confusion, self-doubt, and internalized shame (Johnson et al., 2020; Richards et al., 2016). However, supportive community and coping strategies can serve as protective factors against these harmful impacts of marginalization (Johnson et al., 2020). For example, TGNC youth whose identities are affirmed by others around them through the use of their chosen name experience lower rates of depression, suicidal ideation, and suicidal behavior than those whose true names are not affirmed (Russell et al., 2018).

Given the power of language to affirm and deny trans identities, foreign language classrooms may pose unique challenges to non-binary students, as language constitutes not only the medium but also the matter of instruction. Foreign language classroom contexts are situated at the intersection of multiple linguistic, cultural, and ideological systems, offering constraints and possibilities within and among these influences. Gender as a social and grammatical construct emerges as contested territory among languages, as the possibilities for self-expression in the target language and the dominant school language(s) may not align. In particular, non-binary students learning French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Hebrew, Arabic, Russian, and other languages based in a traditionally bi-gendered grammar may be faced with the task of representing themselves within a linguistic system that renders them inarticulable. These students may be at a greater risk of experiencing epistemic violence such as misgendering, or being told that their gender does not exist or is not real. The intersection of non-binary identities and French language learning has sparked scholarship from many angles, including non-binary forms and linguistic strategies (e.g., Alpheratz, 2017, 2018; Ashley, 2019; Greco, 2019; Knisely, 2020a; Shroy, 2017), evolutions in language policy (e.g., Ashley, 2017; Kosnick, 2019; Pilon, 2020), and pedagogical recommendations for gender-inclusive L2 classrooms (e.g., Knisely, 2021; Knisely & Paiz, 2021; Kosnick, 2021; Provitola, 2019; Swamy, 2019). Notably, the voices of non-binary foreign language learners remain largely undocumented in this research, yet these are urgently needed to inform and support the development of inclusive and affirming pedagogical practices.

This paper addresses this gap by presenting the exploratory case study of a non-binary teenager, Ari (a pseudonym), and their experiences studying French at a U.S. high school. I will address the following research questions: What subject positions are available to Ari in French class? In what ways is Ari able to exercise agency by defining and claiming alternative positions? To this end, I will begin by discussing the struggle for non-binary representation in the two languages most relevant to the U.S. French foreign language setting, English and French. Next, I will review nascent work investigating the experiences of non-binary language learners. I will then discuss several concepts central to this study, namely a poststructuralist understanding of identity, investment, and agency. After describing my methodology, I will present and analyze Ari's story as it emerged from their testimony, exploring in particular the subject positions available to Ari in their French classroom environment and their agentive self-positioning. I will close with implications of Ari's experience for educators and researchers in applied linguistics.

NON-BINARY LANGUAGE

The varied reception of gender-neutral language in English and French is grounded in their respective structural linguistic and sociocultural contexts. Structurally, gender manifests differently in each language. English contains three types of linguistic gender: *naturalized gender*, or explicit references to the gender of individuals (e.g. *boy, aunt*), *referential gender* carried in pronouns referring to individuals (e.g. *he, her*), and *social gender*, or implicit cultural associations between a word and a given gender (e.g. *nurse, handsome*) (Motschenbacher, 2014). Since most English words are not marked by gender, it is often possible to simply avoid attributing a gendered identity to a person. This discursive strategy can be used for several purposes: for example, to refer to an individual whose gender is not known, is intentionally not disclosed, or who identifies as non-binary. Expressing non-gendered identities in English is facilitated by the longstanding existence of gender-neutral words to describe people such as *child*, *parent*, *friend*, and *sibling*, as well as the widespread, singular use of the third-person pronoun *they*. While the singular *they* has been negatively judged by some as "colloquial" (Doyle, 2019) and "ungrammatical" (Doll, 2013), it has also been endorsed by prescriptive authorities such as the APA (Lee, 2019) and the Merriam-Webster dictionary (Knox, 2019). In queer anglophone communities, linguistic creativity and advocacy has led to popular neologisms such as *nibling* (a gender-neutral word for *niece* or *nephew*, modeled after the word *sibling*), *Mx.* as a non-binary honorific to supplement *Ms.*, *Miss*, *Mrs.*, or *Mr.*, and a plethora of non-binary neopronouns such as *ze*, *ey*, *per*, *fae*, and more (Marcus, 2021). While the use, comprehensibility, and acceptance level of these neologisms varies depending on the context, non-binary language is unmistakably on the rise in the U.S., propelled by continued activism for trans and non-binary rights and recognition (Bergman & Barker, 2017).

The expression of non-binary identities in French poses its own set of linguistic and cultural challenges. In addition to the three types of linguistic gender present in English, French traditionally features *grammatical gender*, as the binary categorization of "masculine" or "feminine" is obligatorily assigned not only to all nouns, but also to corresponding articles, adjectives, and pronouns. Grammatical gender is not always associated with naturalized gender or sex: for example, inanimate objects and countries are gendered as a function of morphology rather than any biological or social meaning (Knisely, 2020b). However, in the context of people, grammatical gender frequently aligns with naturalized gender so that communication with or about people in French typically requires attributing "masculine" or "feminine" forms as a proxy for "male" or "female." Of the two grammatical genders, the masculine form is constructed as neutral and dominant, so that the inclusion of any masculine noun in a group obliges the

corresponding use of masculine forms, rendering the feminine grammatically invisible. Two movements of linguistic activism in French have proposed grammatical innovation to promote gender justice: *l'écriture inclusive* (inclusive writing), focused on combatting sexism, and *le français non-binaire* (non-binary French), working for representation of individuals who identify outside of the gender binary.

Écriture Inclusive

Understanding current-day expressions of non-binary identities in French requires a historical perspective on linguistic movements for gender equality. In the 1980s and '90s, feminist linguists in Quebec argued that sexism in language both reflects and perpetuates sexism in society, and they advocated for a French language that promotes parity between men and women through equal linguistic representation of these two genders (e.g., LaBrosse, 1996). This advocacy was both lexical, such as the Office Quebécois de la Langue Française (OQLF)'s official creation of feminine equivalents for professional titles, and discursive, as a set of practices known as *l'écriture inclusive*. *L'écriture inclusive* popularized writing techniques including the use of punctuation marks such as dash, period, or middot ("*point median")* in plural nouns and adjectives to represent masculine and feminine forms simultaneously in writing (e.g., writing "Cher·e·s étudiant·e·s" rather than "chers étudiants" to explicitly include both male and female students). The use of *l'écriture inclusive* varies in francophone contexts: while some institutions and individuals adopt it categorically, some French authorities have denounced it as superfluous, confusing, and ideological (e.g., the French minister of education Jean-Michel Blanquer (Rioux, 2021)). The *Académie Française* in 2017 issued an official statement sounding a "cry of alarm" as *l'écriture inclusive* put the French language in "mortal peril," citing the unity and legibility of the language as essential for preserving the nation and heritage for future generations (Kosnick, 2019).

Non-Binary French

Queer and trans linguistic activists have critiqued the binary orientation of *l'écriture inclusive*, yet have also extended its techniques to express non-binary identities in French, adopting in particular the use of the middot in singular forms (e.g., *Dominique est fatigué·e*). Neologisms such as the non-gendered third person subject pronouns *iel, ielle, ille, yel, yelle, ol, al*, and others have been developed to supplement the traditional *il* and *elle*. Words such as *frœur* (a portmanteau of *frère*, brother, and *sœur*, sister) and *adelphe* (relatively rare in French, borrowed from the Greek) are proposed as non-gendered equivalents to the English word *sibling*. Permutations of different gender-neutral words, endings, and discursive strategies, varied and in constant evolution, are in use within queer francophone communities worldwide (Knisely, 2020a) and are recommended by francophone organizations promoting queer- and trans-inclusive environments (e.g., Fondation Émergence, n.d.). Alpheratz, a non-binary French linguist, has proposed a new grammatical system reviving the defunct neuter gender in French, and drawing gender-neutral noun and adjective endings from Medieval French such as *-x, -z*, and *-æ* (Alpheratz, 2018); they have demonstrated the feasibility of the system by using it to write a complete novel, *Requiem* (Alpheratz, 2015). However, the legitimacy of non-binary French remains contested by linguistic and administrative authorities. While the OQLF acknowledges the need for appropriate language to refer to non-binary individuals, it recommends recourse to techniques of circumlocution and traditionally epicene (non-gendered) terms rather than neologisms, punctuated forms, or morphological innovation. In France, the 2021 inclusion of *iel* in the *Le Robert* dictionary testifies to the cultural import of non-binary language as it evolves, and the backlash it received demonstrates its resonance

far beyond concerns of mere language (Bimbenet, 2021). For advocates, non-binary language means a step towards representation and justice for oppressed communities (e.g., Ashley, 2019; Baillargeon, 2021). For opponents, arguments are varied, virulent, and frequently transphobic. *Iel* has been censured as a blind denial of a binary biological "reality," as a destructive imposition of "woke" ideology, and as a senseless degradation of the French language (Boutin, 2021). Given the backlash that both *l'écriture inclusive* and *le français non-binaire* have faced in the French educational system (Buitekant, 2021; Rioux, 2021), it stands to reason that these linguistic movements may not have found their way to all U.S. foreign language classrooms.

The personal and political stakes of non-binary language are high, rooted in the tension between self-identity and external categorization. For foreign language learners, these stakes are further complicated by the intersection of two languages within the classroom space, as well as the structural and social context of schools. To better understand this dynamic, I turn to the sparse previous research inclusive of non-binary language learners.

NON-BINARY LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Only three studies to current knowledge document the experiences of non-binary language learners in a U.S. context. In an unpublished master's thesis, Mitchell's (2018) survey of 141 LGBTQ+ university foreign language learners suggests that students with non-binary identities display higher levels of foreign language learning anxiety than male- and female-identified students, whether transgender or cisgender. The fact that only five non-binary or agender students were included in the sample poses a significant limitation to the finding. Baros (2019) offers a deeper qualitative dive in their unpublished doctoral dissertation, an interview study of three transgender adults, two of whom, Alex and Blaise, are non-binary speakers of English who had also studied Spanish. Both Alex and Blaise felt comfortable expressing their identities in English using *they/them* pronouns. Both felt frustrated at a lack of non-binary options in their Spanish classes and a framing of the language as without variation. Blaise, who chose to use the neologism *ol* as a personal pronoun in French, opted for feminine pronouns and agreement in Spanish, stating, "If I was aware of other options, I might have chosen something else" (p. 89). Alex chose to use masculine pronouns and agreement, saying, "I'm ok with them, even if I don't love them" (p. 90). Both adjusted their behavior and expectations based on the perceived safety of different environments, accommodating misgendering when necessary. Baros observes that despite these experiences of invalidation in Spanish, both participants remained motivated to learn the language.

In the only study thus far pertaining to adolescent learners, Heidenfeldt (2020) offers observations of a non-binary high school student of French, "Zéphyr" who uses three different, evolving versions of their name and pronouns in different linguistic and social contexts at school. Heidenfeldt interprets this behavior as evidence of Zéphyr's symbolic competence as a language user: "In both English and French, Zéphyr knew the rules of the standard languages and bent them in different contexts [...] in order to remember, imagine, and enact all of the identities that they had been living" (Heidenfeldt, 2020, p. 57). It is unfortunate that Zéphyr's perspective is absent from this study, as no other accounts of non-binary adolescent language learners exist in current literature.

These three studies compel further research at the intersection of this population and setting, as much for its findings as its absences. Mitchell's (2018) suggestion of elevated anxiety levels compels further investigation. While Baros (2019) and Heidenfeldt (2020) offer initial portraits of non-binary learners, highlighting the agency that these individuals exercise across varied social and linguistic environments, considerably more work is

needed to understand the specific experiences of adolescents in schools. To what extent are students with marginalized gender identities granted space for discursive existence in foreign language learning contexts, and what actions are they able to take in order to be and express who they are? The relationship between identity and agency is central to this question and will be explored next.

IDENTITY AND AGENCY FOR L2 LEARNERS

An understanding of gender as a social and cultural construction renders feminist poststructuralism an appropriate theoretical framing for the present study. Indeed, gender as a system for categorization is a prime example of a discourse, or system of power and knowledge (Foucault, 1980), that assigns meaning to social categories and restricts possibilities for identification. Poststructuralist approaches to gender in social sciences have increasingly rejected an essentialized, biologically based view of gender "difference" for a more pluralistic view of "diversity" (Cameron, 2005), although study of this "diversity" frequently remains limited to the binary repertoires of *masculinity* and *femininity* (c.f. Cameron, 1997). This theoretical shift is largely influenced by Butler's (1990) proposition that gender is a matter of socially situated performance rather than innate status.

Within a discursive system that offers only mutually exclusive male and female categories, non-binary identities are relegated to the margins or erased entirely. Drawing on Austin's (1962) claim that "the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action" (p. 6), Butler (1997) holds that the consequences of linguistic representation are not purely symbolic, but also ontological:

> Language sustains the body not by bringing it into being or feeding it in a literal way; rather, it is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of the body first becomes possible. [...] One "exists" not only by virtue of being recognized, but, in a prior sense, being *recognizable.* (p. 5)

The existence of words to name identities beyond two gender categories is therefore of great consequence to people who are non-binary. Trans theorists have drawn the attention back to the material body as a critique of poststructuralism's focus on discourse. Chu (2017) writes: "What does it matter whether bodies exist outside discourse or not when yours is under low, slow siege, not just by the threat of physical assault but also by bureaucracy, depression, anxiety, and precarity?" (p. 144)

In the present study, identity is understood as discursively constructed, embodied, contextual, and contested. Weedon (1987) describes one's sense of self as both subject of, and subject to, relations of power in particular social sites. She identifies language as "the place where actual and possible forms of social organization [...] are defined and contested, [...] the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is *constructed* "(p. 21). While many researchers utilize Weedon's term *subjectivity*, I will, for the sake of clarity and accessibility, refer instead to both *identity* and *subject position*. Identities are "constructed by and in discourses that supply the terms by which identities are expressed (identity performance) and assign differential values to different identities or subject positions" (Pavlenko, 2002, p. 284). In contrast, subject position refers to "the intersection of factors that position individuals" which "influence the ways in which we are perceived by others" (p. 284). Hall (1996) clarifies the relationship between identity and subject position by calling identities "points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us" (pp. 5-6), governed by the discourses operating within a particular space and time.

The interplay of language, recognition, and agency is complicated in a foreign language classroom setting, in which possibilities for subject positions vary among different linguistic systems, ideologies, and social contexts. Furthermore, language learning offers individuals opportunities to imagine new possibilities and selves. Kramsch (2009) argues that experiences of language learning are intensely connected with emotion, identity, and the body. While an individual's multifaceted identities undoubtedly impact their experiences learning a language in a given setting, the experience is complicated by power structures that grant unequal levels of symbolic power to some identities over others, affecting students' level of *investment* and learning outcomes (Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton, 2011). Overtly or covertly discriminatory classroom practices may thwart the learning efforts of even highly motivated students (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Nonetheless, research into investment also demonstrates language users' agency to resist the subjugation imposed by these systems, to "resist the subject position or even set up a counterdiscourse which positions the person in a powerful rather than marginalized subject position" (Norton Peirce, 1995, pp. 15-16). Following this assertion, non-binary language users may be able to counter marginalization by creating and claiming new subject positions.

I draw on Yashima's (2012) understanding of agency as "the human capacity not only to resist imposed subject positions but also to make choices and change the course of one's life, to create new ways of being" (p. 5). In this sense, agency is not only about doing but also being; it can take the form of action or inaction, such as passive opposition or resistance (Miller, 2012). Agentive possibilities are mediated by social, ideological, and spatiotemporal context (Ahearn, 2001). While considered to be advantageous for all language learners (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000), agency is crucial for individuals with marginalized social identities to critically understand and overcome systemic subjugation and erasure, exercising the power of voice and choice. Given that agency can both be *enacted* through language and *encoded* in language (Duranti, 2004), this study pairs first-person accounts as elicited through interview with a discourse analytic approach in order to understand Ari's experiences and agency both in the interview context and in the classroom experiences they recount. The methodology will be described next.

METHODOLOGY

The Participant

Ari is a white, 17-year-old student at a public high school in a wealthy, suburban town in a socially progressive region of the northeast United States. They live with their mother, father, brother, and two dogs. Ari is a talented student with many interests, including singing, acting, manga, anime, and creative writing. They have known they were non-binary since the eighth grade. They learned English as their first language at home and studied French as a foreign language at school for six years, from sixth to eleventh grade, with different teachers each year of high school. Ari recalls that across this time, grammatical gender in their French classes was consistently presented as obligatory, binary, and associated with the supposed gender of people. At no point did discussions of *écriture inclusive*, non-binary French, or gender-related activism occur during their six years of learning French.

Recruitment, Data Collection, and Analysis

Ari contacted me in 2019 in response to an advertisement that was shared on social media through an organization serving LGBTQ+ youth, stating that I was looking to interview non-binary high school students about their experiences learning French or Spanish at

school. Ari responded right away and after obtaining their assent and permission from a parent, I arranged to meet with Ari at a local library. The semi-structured interview lasted 50 minutes and was guided by questions about gender, language, school, and French class. I remained in touch with Ari by email following the interview. Ari's creative writing, our email correspondence, and observational field notes served to supplement and triangulate interview data. Additionally, member-checking was employed to ensure that the analysis aligned with Ari's understanding of their own experience.

A social practice orientation to qualitative research theorizes interview data as co-constructed between the interviewer and interviewee, contingent upon the particular context and impacted by the agency of both parties (Talmy, 2010). One incident from ninth grade French class, which occurred during the 2016-2017 school year, had motivated Ari to be interviewed, constituting a "critical event" (Webster & Mertova, 2007) in their experiences learning the language. As this event was retold with Ari's French teacher as the antagonist, my positionality was particularly salient during the interview. As a white, adult, cisgender woman and French teacher, I occupied a position of power over Ari on several axes that mirrored their relationship to their former teacher, a contextual factor that undoubtedly influenced the way they told their story. My role as a supportive listener and the empathy I offered as a fellow queer person made me hopeful of offering Ari recognition that they had been denied.

Data analysis occurred in multiple stages. After transcribing the interview, I employed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify patterns related to Ari's identity as it is expressed and constrained through language, considering both the "then-and-there" of Ari's stories and the "here-and-now" telling within the interview context (Prior, 2016). Initial codes emerged and were then grouped into broader themes such as *coming out* and *being misgendered*. Review of Ari's testimony within these themes revealed nuanced patterns across contexts, in which language (*English* or *French*), setting (*home, school, French class*), and audience (*family, peers*, *teachers*) were relevant factors. Finally, discourse analysis allowed a focus on the interrelation of linguistic form and meaning as constrained by power within social structures (Blommaert, 2005). In presenting their identity and both describing and enacting agency, Ari employed particular discursive strategies that will be discussed.

ANALYSIS

The analysis to follow investigates Ari's experiences and subject positions in several discursive environments. I first present an overview of Ari's home and school experiences in English, with particular attention to how they express and assert their identity in these settings. I then focus on Ari's experiences in high school French class in French and in English.

Ari in English

The majority of Ari's life has operated through the medium of English. Despite having been assigned female at birth, Ari actively positions themself outside of this system, using the term "non-binary" and *they/them* pronouns to name and communicate their identity. Ari describes an emotional response to being gendered by others in interaction: gender-neutral language "feels good" to them, while being referred to as masculine or *he* "doesn't feel good" yet "feels less bad" than being gendered as female or *she*, which "hurts." Ari interprets their relative preference for being gendered as masculine as the result of implicit masculine norms in language; for example, being called "dude" "doesn't feel bad" because of the way that the term is used gender-neutrally. To understand this distinction, Ari invokes the linguistic concept of *markedness*: "there's just this idea in society that [...] masculinity is more gender-neutral than femininity, that like- masculine is the, default and feminine is like the, *other*[3]."

Ari also suggests that having been assigned female at birth makes being misgendered as female more painful, as a frequent invalidation that they experience.

The struggle over language to express Ari's identity in English occurred in both their personal life and at school.

Family and friends

For Ari, living openly as non-binary has involved a process of self-discovery and self-advocacy that has operated through language. As a child, they describe having been "very gender nonconforming" and "the tomboy," not fitting neatly into available labels. When Ari discovered "non-binary" as an identifier that operated outside of the two categories available, they recognized that it described them and "started identifying with it." In addition to adopting the term non-binary, Ari chose different pronouns, they/them, and considered changing their name before settling on a gender-neutral variant of their old one. As for coming out to peers, Ari states:

> it kind of became a process of just telling people, but my friend group changed a lot in middle school? So, there was, not too much of a, like, I knew you as a *girl* and now I have to like, change how I think about you, because, um, in high school I just introduced myself as non-binary to everybody.

Ari exercises agency in the coming-out process as a grammatical subject of mainly verbal processes, by "identifying," "say[ing] it," "telling people," and "introduc[ing them]self." Although coming out involved change for the people around them, Ari views their non-binary identity as consistent, simply affirmed by new language.

While navigating the interpersonal challenges of coming out as non-binary, Ari was faced with the additional task of teaching people what that meant. In doing so, Ari created and occupied a new discursive space in English for their family and friends. Ari struggled with this lack of shared language when coming out to their mother:

> I think like in the back of my head my mom was kind of like, there's a decent chance, that Ari is gonna identify as trans, when they're older, but- um, she didn't, like *know* that non- that being non-binary was a thing? So she- that wasn't really like something she had- she was prepared for.

To Ari's mother, "trans" was an available label for someone who presented as gender non-conforming. The discursive space to be non-binary was not available until Ari explicitly supplied the language to name it. Ari's use of the pronoun *they* while recounting their mother's imagined thoughts subtly advocates for the legitimacy of their identity in the past and present, as a part of Ari that remains true regardless of the language available to describe it.

School

Gender was particularly salient for Ari at school, as being referred to in the third person was a frequent occurrence. To avoid being misgendered at their new high school, Ari contacted their school guidance counselor at the beginning of ninth grade to inform the school of their non-binary identity and the pronouns that they use. With Ari's permission, the guidance counselor shared this information with Ari's teachers; however, teachers neither used their correct pronouns nor acknowledged receiving the information, with the exception of Ari's ninth grade French teacher (an event that will be explored in more detail later). Despite their discomfort at being misgendered, Ari hesitated to take further action because of their shyness and status as a new student.

As Ari gained confidence and allies at school, they became more able to advocate for others' use of *they/them* pronouns to refer them. In ninth grade, if a teacher misgendered Ari in class, friends often spoke up to correct the teacher. In tenth and eleventh grades, Ari built up the courage to approach the teacher after class about the misgendering, an interaction that could feel "really awkward." Ari describes the negative impact of teachers apologizing excessively:

> Just like the worst feeling is when, a teacher messes up your pronoun and you correct them and then they like, keep you after class and start like, apologizing about how *sorry* they are and how *hard they're trying* because it like, it makes the issue about me for a- like asking them to do something for me and they're, *trying* to do a thing for me but it's a *difficult* thing to do and like, it's not, and it's a sign of basic respect. I'm not asking you for anything that you aren't giving the other kids in the class. Maybe it's more difficult for you but that's your own issue to work out.

This example falls into the category of "mixed-perception misgendering" (Simpson & Dewaele, 2019), as it appears to be unintentional and is followed by apologies. However, for Ari, teachers' expression of their good intentions does not alleviate the hurt of the moment; rather, the teachers' centering of their own discomfort implicitly blames Ari for the event, suggesting that Ari is asking for something unreasonable. Ari's emphatic use of the present progressive in this passage and the push and pull of the chosen verbs ("apologizing," "asking," "trying," "asking," "trying," "asking," "[not] giving") suggest an ongoing tension that continues to impact Ari. Ari stands firm in their conviction that every student deserves to be referred to with language that corresponds to their identity. A useful framing can be borrowed from Ruiz's (1984) orientations to language planning, in which language can be viewed *as a problem, as a right,* or *as a resource.* While excessive apologies position Ari's gender as a problem, Ari reframes gender as a right, in which pronouns constitute "a sign of basic respect."

With age and practice, Ari has become increasingly confident addressing misgendering. When a teacher misgenders Ari*,* Ari now corrects them in the moment, resulting in immediate uptake; for Ari, this is the "ideal" experience:

> I might have to say it once or twice 'cause at first they didn't like, know what I was talking about, but, they messed up, I corrected them, they said sorry, and like the, class continued.

Ari's use of the preterit to describe this interaction as a series of completed events contrasts with the present progressive of the previous passage. The verbs "messed up," "corrected," "said sorry", and "continued" suggest that the best possible misgendering is an experience that is quickly acknowledged, rectified, and over.

Discussion

Binary gender categories are clearly present in Ari's day-to-day English life. However, Ari is able to resist gendered categorization by claiming and consistently advocating for a space outside of the binary by way of several linguistic strategies. First, Ari uses the singular pronoun they and the term non-binary to legitimate their identity by explicitly naming it. In doing so, Ari articulates their alternative position using terms that are commonly used in queer communities and which are easily searchable to people unfamiliar with them. Second, Ari educates their family, peers, and school adults by proactively sharing information about themself and non-binary gender identities in general. Finally, Ari actively intervenes in interactions in which they are mistakenly placed in a gender category, "correcting" teachers

despite the imbalance in age and power. In addition to Ari's firm self-advocacy, one affordance present is Ari's socially liberal environment, which may provide the people around them with general familiarity with LGBTQIA+ identities and a desire to demonstrate tolerance. However, the frequent misgendering that Ari reports is striking evidence that harm continues to be done despite good intentions. Affirming their non-binary identity proved more challenging for Ari in high school French class.

Ari in French

Coming out as non-binary at the end of eighth grade changed Ari's experiences learning French. When Ari recalls studying French in middle school, they observe that, "my gender never really came into play in all of it, because I wasn't like thinking about it or talking about it." However, in high school French class, Ari's gender "became an issue," as they were informed that there were only two options available. Ari navigated this challenge by making a conscious choice between the options and by changing their decision when it felt right.

Choosing elle: *Pragmatism*

When Ari's ninth grade French teacher received word from the guidance counselor that Ari used they/them pronouns, she broached the topic with Ari:

> On the first day of class she kept me after, was just like hey, I got this email that you use "they/them" pronouns, but like there isn't really a gender-neutral pronoun in French, so which one would you like to use in French. And so, um, I told her that I was going to use "elle," the feminine, because... uh, a lot of, French is such a gendered language that, um, that, you have to like practice, like, *this* is the kind of adjective that you use [...] and since I had been using "elle" for three years I thought, well, it's going to be easier if I keep using that. So that's what I said that I'd use.

Noticeable here is both Ari's and the teacher's view of French as a static and unavoidably binary system, in which gender-neutral possibilities do not exist. Undeterred, Ari navigates the system by choosing to be gendered as feminine, calling this option "easier" due to their previous practice with it. Ari continued to use feminine agreement in French throughout ninth grade, using the familiarity of these forms as a strategy for academic success.

Choosing il*: Markedness*

In tenth grade, Ari changed their mind. As their understanding of French developed, they noticed that the masculine was considered closest to gender-neutral, and determined that the best way to reflect their identity would be to use masculine forms to describe themself:

> like, in French, if there is a group of guys and girls, then you use the masculine. So kind of like in English, like, masculine is seen as the default and feminine is seen as the other. And... it just became apparent to me halfway through my tenth grade year that like- if masculine is seen as more of the default, of th- more of the like, neutral, then I'd rather use the masculine.

With a nuanced discourse that echoes their reactions to being gendered in English, Ari considers the "default" categorization of masculinity to approach neutrality in French, as opposed to the specificity conveyed by the marked feminine forms. Recognizing that

neither category will perfectly reflect their identity, Ari exercised agency by making a new choice that reflected their evolving awareness of the French language.

To initiate this change, Ari chose an indirect strategy, which they acknowledge was risky: changing their gendered self-representation in French without notifying their tenth-grade teacher:

> I was using "elle" at the beginning of the year and then I decided, halfway through that, during, in French, I would rather like, use the masculine to talk about myself. So I started changing it, and when I wrote, about myself on papers, and at first, like, was worried that my teacher was going to, like, *grade* me wrong? Because the teacher's going to be like, well you're using the masculine here, but you use the feminine, so... um, at first I was like a bit hesitant about it because like... *literally* changing how you refer to yourself could, get you, like, cause you to lose points, on, things. Um, but, she just kind of like, went along with it, we didn't talk about it or anything, but she never took points off, and she like, picked up, that, when talking about me in French, I wanted to use the masculine.

Ari's shift in the way they represented themself in French was clearly significant to them, as it was worth the risk of losing points on assignments. Despites being "worried" and "hesitant" because of the teacher's position of power, Ari views themself as an agent in command of the language that they use. They position linguistic forms as grammatical objects, external tools that can be "use[d]," that one can desire ("would rather," "wanted") and control ("decided," "changing"). Ari's security in their own identity is a constant: the language they use does not change who they are, but can be modified to better reflect it. Ari even suggests that the teacher might grade them "wrong," basing the norm on criteria that Ari themself was shifting. Ari continued to use masculine forms in French through eleventh grade, when their new teacher also "got the hint" and graded Ari as masculine without discussion.

Gender-neutral possibilities

While navigating the binary limits imposed in French class, Ari was aware of a third possibility: gender-neutral language in French. Though drawn to the idea, Ari perceives several obstacles to using gender-neutral French, including the obscurity of these forms and Ari's own relative lack of skill and authority as a French learner. Internet research proved insufficient as the sources Ari found were in French and too difficult for even an advanced learner. Ari also evokes the challenge of a power dynamic between teachers and students, native speakers and non-native speakers:

> It can be really scary for a student to, be like, hey, you are like, teaching me this language, but I am trying to like present to you […] like, here is a new part of the language that you've never heard of! And I need *you* to use it. Like, it's, really *scary*, because, you're not even on like the same *level* because, their understanding of the language is so much higher than yours.

Ari suggests that students' ability to self-advocate is limited not only by classroom structures of authority, but also by students' limited skills in the target language. For this reason, Ari concludes that teachers need "to do their own work" researching non-binary language and making it available to students.

Discussion

Ari's accounts of their experiences in French express a view of the language as limited to two fixed and unavoidable gender categories. The lack of alternative discursive possibilities in French was a source of frustration for Ari, "frustration with like, the language itself and like, how it functions." Due to their role as a student and non-expert, Ari lacked the knowledge and authority to assume alternative subject positions, for example, by researching non-binary language in French or by inventing their own rules of agreement.

In a French foreign language setting, assimilation to the binary gender system comes at high stakes, as students are evaluated based on producing consistently gendered forms. Nonetheless, within these limitations, Ari exercised agency by choosing which forms to use and by changing their mind, citing reasons that served their own pragmatic and representational purposes and guiding their teachers in the process. Again, despite the structural challenges that French poses, Ari's sense of self remains consistent: faced with the mismatch between their identity and the language, Ari views French as the problem, but a navigable one. The key event explored in the next section contrasts with this perspective, as Ari's ninth grade French teacher situates Ari's gender as the problem.

Ari in English in French Class

Ari's ninth grade French class proved to be a uniquely restrictive environment that deeply impacted Ari's relationship with French thereafter. In contrast with Ari's general success asserting their identity as non-binary at school, the critical event in French class, which also occurred in English, denied Ari this possibility.

The critical event

The event occurred when Ari's ninth grade French teacher, who Ari described as an older woman and a native speaker of French, asked the class to explain a grammar concept to a student who had been absent. This teacher, as previously noted, had responded to the guidance counselor's message about Ari using *they/them* pronouns in English by asking Ari whether they wanted to use *il* or *elle* in French. Ari describes being vocal and engaged during the lesson, in which students spoke in French and the teacher responded, uncharacteristically, in English:

> So I was participating a lot, in class, because, I'm, that's like, I, participate a lot in class, and... I, uh, like, n- remembered a lot of the stuff so I was like really eager to share it.

Ari's use of verbs in the active voice underscores their role as a knowledgeable actor who can "participate," "remember," and "share" in the classroom community. This sense of empowerment changes as Ari becomes the object of third-person commentary in English by the teacher and a peer. In the process of affirming Ari's correct answers, the teacher repeatedly misgenders Ari:

> And she kept complimenting me but she, it was in English, so she was like, listen to Ari's answer, *her* answer is so good, like, look at what *she's* doing, stuff like that. And so there was a girl sitting behind me, who, like, every time that she misgendered me she would like quietly say "they" or "them," and she wasn't interrupting the class, it was a whisper, like, I could barely hear it and she was sitting right behind me, but it was like a quietly affirming thing, just like, "I know that she's messing up and I know what pronouns you use."

Here, Ari is positioned as object of an authoritative teacher discourse that genders them as feminine, and a whispered counter-discourse by a student that reaffirms their non-binary identity. In this passage, Ari is no longer the active subject of the narrative, but an object of both discourses ("complimenting me") and the subject of only one action that is receptive and attenuated by a modal verb and an adverb ("I could barely hear it"). Ari recalls that when the other student "corrected" the teacher with "the right pronoun," the teacher would briefly pause and then continue the lesson.

The teacher later asked Ari to stay after class and demanded that they explain the other student's interruption. Ari explained, "well, like, you were- not using my pronoun and she was just trying to be *nice* in correcting you." The teacher then "reprimanded" Ari at length for the interruption, turning her frustration to Ari's gender:

> And then, um, she started saying things like, "I speak four languages, you can't expect me to learn special rules for you?" and like, making this whole thing about how it was *my* fault that like, she wouldn't learn my pronouns because, like, I was asking for special rules, and it was too confusing, and I was like... uh, like *I* was making a big deal out of it when *I* had done nothing and the other girl did it just to be nice.

Ari did not understand why they were being "punished"; they became overwhelmed and began to cry.

> [S]he like, yelled at me, after she, blamed me for an action another student did to be nice to me that wasn't b- the action's not harming anyone, the action was only, to help *me*, to like, like, support *me* and I hadn't done *anything*[.]

In contrast to the empowered, vocal subject who appeared at the beginning of the narrative, Ari is reduced to a grammatical object in this account: the object of "blame", "reprimand," "punish[ment]," and "fault" by the teacher, and of intended "help" and "support" from their peer. Ari appears as a subject only to rebut accusations ("like, I was asking for special rules," "like *I* was making a big deal out of it") and to insist on their innocence through inaction ("*I* had done nothing," "I hadn't done *anything*"). Ari's sense of powerlessness is clear throughout this account as they are reduced from a confident participant to silence and tears.

This critical event impacted Ari differently from other experiences being misgendered, in which the mistake did not shake their sense of self. In this case, the French teacher's insistent, authoritative rejection of Ari's pronouns in the form of a verbal reprimand constituted an "aggressive or 'political' misgendering" (Simpson & Dewaele, 2019, p. 105) and impacted Ari as punishment for using *they/them* pronouns. Because Ari had not acted during the classroom incident, the event felt like blame for simply existing. Although Ari knows that *they/them* pronouns are "right" and "correct," the impact of this incident was heightened to a near ontological level, representing "a *denial*" of who they are:

> It was like, you said you used "elle," so now you're a girl [....] I'm going to treat you like a girl and I'm going to punish you if you like, try to do anything about it.

By misgendering and reprimanding Ari, the teacher authoritatively placed Ari into a discursive category that did not fit, closing down possibilities for dialogue.

The foreign language classroom environment was a significant factor in this event as the two different discursive systems in operation, French and English, each presented different limitations and possibilities. For Ari, these systems are separate and require

different processes to navigate, as previously illustrated: English includes the singular *they* alongside *he* and *she*, while French in Ari's classroom experience, sheltered from evolutions in non-binary French in francophone communities, offers only *il* and *elle*. As Ari has expressed, the hurt caused by being called *she* in English has a different impact than being called *elle* in French, an option that Ari chose for lack of a gender-neutral option in the context of their French class. However, Ari's ninth grade teacher may have taken Ari's use of *elle* in French as justification to refer to Ari as *she* in English, without recognizing the differential impact of these forms or respecting the pronouns that Ari had communicated. The binary norms implicit in French, as presented and defended by the teacher, dominated the discursive space of the classroom and were used to limit possibilities in English to *he* and *she*, positioning resistance as a punishable offense.

Fallout

Ari's critical event triggered ongoing fear and anxiety that harmed their engagement in other classes and relationships with other teachers. It also prompted Ari's decision to stop taking French as soon as possible:

> From then on, it was pretty much just, like, most colleges want at least three years of a language, so I'll take three years of a language, and the moment that I finish, um, like, junior year French, I'm stopping it. And *I* made that decision in freshman year and, that's what I stuck with. I was, so happy the moment that I finished my French final, because I was just able to walk out and be like, I never have to take the French language again and I never have to, *deal* with this situ- kind of situation again.

Ari's agency, pride, and relief in their decision-making power are evident through their repeated stress of the first-person pronoun ("*I* made that decision") and modality expressing a release from obligation ("I was just able to," "I never have to"). Despite Ari's inability to change past events, they can exercise some control over their future.

Ari's voice became a powerful tool for mentorship among their peers. After the critical event, Ari used creative writing to process their experience and warn other queer students about their teacher. They shared the story widely and performed one version at a slam poetry event. Ari also took on a leadership role in their school's Gender and Sexuality Alliance, which brought them a sense of pride and empowerment.

> I remember like the most proud moment of my life is that I had three friends come to me for advice about how to come out as non-binary in the span of two weeks… and that was like the most proud moment of my life because I know that when I stand up there and I talk to people, and I'm just like, I'm here, and I'm non-binary, and like, I've... been through... shit, like, because I'm non-binary, and I can like, I'm still here, and I'm still standing here and I could, share my experiences and I can give advice, and stuff like that is, the most amazing feeling for me.

Ari exudes confidence and strength throughout this passage, using 13 clauses beginning with "I" that assert their existence, knowledge, capability, resilience, and ultimately, survival. Three superlative structures accompanying the repeated assertion "I'm non-binary" underscore the connection between agency, self-determination, and joy.

Discussion

Ari's experience in French class illustrates the powerful impact that misgendering can have on a student's investment in language learning. The teacher's use and defense of *she* imposed a subject position on Ari that did not fit, that hurt, and that refused their right

to exist within the space. Ari is thus denied agency, unable to "resist imposed subject positions, [...] make choices, [or] create new ways of being" (Yashima, 2012, p. 5). Resistance is only possible afterwards. Ari rejects French as a system that allows them existence, even after two more years with different teachers. They turn to English creative writing and advocacy to "claim the right to speak" (Darvin & Norton, 2015, p. 51).

Linguistic agency is at the heart of this event as third-person pronouns represent a fundamental site of struggle between representing oneself and being represented by others (Zimman, 2019). Ari is not in control of the ways in which others refer to them, whether to deny (like Ari's teacher) or affirm (like Ari's peer) the identity they know and express. In most areas of their life, surrounded by a supportive community, Ari has successfully advocated for the gender-neutral discursive space conveyed by the English *they*. Ari also adeptly navigates the binary French system presented in class by re-envisioning the available categories in intellectual and practical terms, devoid of ontological ramifications. However, the intersection of the two discursive systems in this particular foreign language classroom created a perfect storm. The binary L2 system presented by the teacher, backed by conservative language ideology, was extended to limit discursive possibilities in the L1. The teacher's authoritative positioning both as teacher and native speaker effectively blocked Ari's access to alternative subject positions in both languages.

Ari's experience demonstrates that while linguistic systems carry different discursive possibilities, these possibilities are also complex and context-sensitive. The singular *they* is available to Ari in some English-language environments but not in others. Similarly, despite the evolutions in inclusive and non-binary French taking place in francophone communities, the French grammar presented in Ari's classroom still limits gender possibilities to two. Ari is unfazed by this and adapts accordingly: the existence of these binary categories in French provokes some frustration but no trauma. It is the authoritative denial of a non-gendered existence in English within the language classroom setting that causes Ari to lose trust in French. These findings illustrate the dynamic nature of identity construction, as an individual's gendered or non-gendered self-representation may vary across languages, over time, and in different settings. While actors such as Ari's teacher undoubtedly play a role in limiting or expanding the subject positions available, larger forces underlie these differences. Notable dimensions in Ari's case include language ideologies (prescriptivism, native speaker authority), gender ideologies (a belief in gender as biologically determined, the legitimacy of non-binary identities), and school power structures (teacher authority, grading systems, discipline). Further research into the experiences of non-binary individuals in U.S. foreign language settings is needed to more deeply explore these factors.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Ari's case illustrates the harm caused by misgendering and underscores the urgency of using language that corresponds to students' gender identities. In order to allow non-binary students access to language learning without trauma, a shift in both teaching content and practices is necessary. Indeed, all students can benefit from learning how to respectfully refer to themselves and to others, that language is constantly evolving and is deeply tied to identity, that no way of being is wrong or impossible, and that each individual chooses how to articulate their own identity and build relationships through the language they use. This perspective is not a constraint but an opportunity for students to develop critical awareness and symbolic competence through the careful consideration of the sociolinguistic dimensions of language use (Heidenfeldt, 2020). While Ari's teacher viewed Ari's gender as a problem and Ari firmly claimed their gender as a right, we can also envision a foreign language pedagogy that considers *gender as a resource*, offering all students

the opportunity to exercise creativity, criticality, and agency in multiple linguistic and discursive realms.

Attitudes towards non-binary identities and language in classrooms also carry high stakes for language teachers and school administrators. Objectives such as promoting enthusiasm for language learning, increasing enrollment, and building strong and lasting programs may be thwarted by teaching practices that marginalize and alienate trans and queer students. Organizations such as Gender Spectrum (n.d.) and Welcoming Schools (2019) offer many concrete recommendations for making classrooms safer and more inclusive spaces for trans and non-binary students, including representing gender diversity on the walls and in curriculum, not organizing students by gender, and developing alternatives to binary language such as "boys and girls." However, foreign language teachers can also benefit from discipline-specific recommendations that take into account the unique ways in which gender manifests in language classroom contexts. There is no one-size-fits all approach to inclusion, but the principles should be applied to local contexts *whether or not there are students known to be trans or non-binary in the classroom*; indeed, the default assumption that people are cisgender, and the idea that inclusive practices are to be used only when a minority group is visibly represented, are fundamentally problematic (Knisely, 2021). Drawing from Ari's story and from work by trans, non-binary, and allied scholars and educators of French (Knisely, 2021; Knisely & Paiz, 2021; Kosnick, 2021; Provitola, 2019; Swamy, 2019), below are recommendations for foreign language teachers.

1) Recognize the legitimacy of non-binary identities and the reality of language change.

The first step for teachers aiming to build inclusive classrooms is self-assessment (Knisely, 2021). Everyone is socialized into particular ideologies of both gender and language. For example, many adults were raised to believe that an individual's gender is determined by their genitals, is limited to either male and female, and can be judged by looking at them. Many adults also learned that the only "real" and "correct" language is dictated by the dictionary or language academies. Both of these attitudes are harmful to trans and non-binary students, as they deny the legitimacy of a part of their identity that is essential to who they are. As a prerequisite for learning, students need to know that their teachers believe that they and the language they use to describe themselves are real. Teachers should continually reflect on their own socialization, assumptions, and knowledge gaps about both gender and language so as to interrupt these attitudes as they surface, both in the classroom and in themselves. At the same time, teachers need to proactively educate themselves about trans and non-binary identities and linguistic evolution to demonstrate informed support and care to their students. For French educators, this means learning and teaching *écriture inclusive* and non-binary French especially if these forms and strategies are not included in curricular materials.

2) Make space for students to articulate their own genders if and how they wish, across languages, audience, time, and space.

It is impossible to predict, based on a student's name, gender expression, behavior, or pronouns in one language, which gendered or non-gendered forms they will choose to use in different languages, across social contexts, or over time. Indeed, Ari's story supports Baros's (2019) and Heidenfeldt's (2020) observations of the variability and change in the linguistic self-positionings of non-binary foreign language learners, based on the language they are using, their sense of safety, and social factors. Teachers should therefore avoid using gendered language to address or refer to students until they hear from students how they wish to be called in that context.

Inviting students to share their own chosen names and pronouns at the start of the semester is a simple practice that can set norms of inclusivity while also providing valuable information to teachers about how to treat each student with respect (Provitola, 2019). This process should be an invitation, not a demand (Knisely, 2021) and is ideally done in private to avoid additional layers of stress for students who are questioning their gender or would be uncomfortable disclosing this information in a public setting. Language teachers can use a written survey at the start of the semester to ask all students, along with other getting-to-know-you questions about their language background and interests, to privately share which pronouns should be used to refer to them in which settings, allowing for variability based on language (e.g., target, source, home languages) and audience (e.g., with other students, school adults, the student's family). Given that gender is experienced as fluid for many people, students can even indicate at the top of the page how/if they are gendering themselves for a particular writing assignment (Knisely, 2021; Provitola, 2019). This practice can also give students the chance to consciously try out different ways of articulating their gender in the language they are learning without fear of penalty. In addition to asking, teachers must be prepared to defend students' right to be addressed respectfully in class by interrupting misgendering and other microaggressions in the classroom (Gender Spectrum, n.d.), including self-correcting, apologizing, and moving on if the mistake is their own.

3) Teach grammatical gender as distinct from social gender or biological sex.

Challenging the universality of the gender binary and building inclusive language classrooms does not require the abolition of grammatical gender. Gender "agreement" among articles, pronouns, nouns, adjectives, and past participles is a skill that many learners of French are required to demonstrate in order to advance in the target language. Exposing students to these conventions can allow them access to a range of educational and professional opportunities in French. Yet by emphasizing that binary grammatical gender is not the same as social gender or biological sex, and by using non-human nouns for practice, teachers can provide students with the means to hone their grammatical awareness without invalidating the existence of trans or non-binary gender identities (Kosnick, 2021). Teachers should also explicitly challenge the assumptions behind the application of grammatical gender to people. Indeed, the grammatical genders of most nouns are unrelated to any social conceptions of gender and this can offer fertile ground for reflection. What is "masculine" as a property shared by, for example, bread, angels, and Peru? What is "feminine" about socks, science, and South America? The answers have little to do with biology or gender roles and everything to do with etymology and morphology. Such critical conversations about grammatical gender can be affirming of trans and non-binary identities, as they emphasize gender as a social and linguistic construct separate from biological sex. If grammatical gender is an important concept to assess, this should be done with non-human nouns or famous people of known genders. Grading students on how they gender themselves can result in invalidating or "correcting" the identities of students who are trans, non-binary, or questioning their gender.

Students also need to know how to talk about themselves and others. Given that both school and target language communities include trans and non-binary people, teaching language to accurately and respectfully express non-binary identities is a communicative imperative for all students.

4) Teach all students how to express non-binary identities in the target language.

Teachers should draw from movements of *écriture inclusive* and non-binary French to teach students how to talk about themselves and others. Kosnick (2021) recommends teaching

four main strategies for articulating non-binary identities in French that are used within queer francophone communities (Knisely, 2020a). These are: epicene words, middots, rewordings, and neologisms.

Epicene words take the same form in the masculine and feminine, and these can be harnessed to describe any person regardless of gender: for example, *artiste, sympathique, agréable*. In oral practice, teachers may also choose to privilege words for which the masculine and feminine forms are pronounced identically (e.g., *âgé/âgée*, *fatigué/fatiguée*) when describing students or individuals whose gender is unknown. (For a list of epicene words recommended for use in Quebec, see Office quebecois de la langue française, 2019). For adjectives that are not epicene, teachers can draw from *l'écriture inclusive* the use of the middot as a common way to express gender-neutral identities in writing, whether the singular or plural (e.g., "*Sam est patient.e,*" "*Iel est heureux·se*").

Rewordings allow speakers to use alternative formulations to avoid attributing a binary gender to someone: for example, asking if someone is *de bonne humeur* instead of *content/contente* or *heureux/heureuse* (Kosnick, 2021). Teachers can model rewordings as a way to teach gender-inclusive communication. For example, instead of using a gendered adjective to describe a person, such as "*Sam est patient*" or "*Sam est patiente*," alternative formulations such as "*Sam est* une personne patiente" or "*Sam est* quelqu'un de patient" move the burden of agreement to the nouns *quelqu'un* (masculine) and *personne* (feminine) so that Sam's gender remains unmarked. As rewording can be challenging for early learners, practicing this skill together can help students to build awareness and flexibility in their self-expression.

Finally, neologisms are a powerful tool for expressing non-binary identities. Non-binary forms in French are incredibly diverse and in constant evolution. In addition to nouns previously evoked such as *frœur* (sibling), gender-neutral noun and adjective endings have also been proposed as alternatives to the middot strategy. These include *-x* (e.g., *jolix* as a gender-neutral form of *joli/jolie*) *-an* (*citoyen, citoyenne, citoyan*), *-xe* or *-t* (*heureux, heureuse, heureuxe/heureut*) and *-æ* (*employé, employée, employæ*) (Fondation Émergence, n.d.). Grammatical innovations have also far exceeded subject pronouns. For ease of reading, the grammatical forms that are currently most widely used and understood are displayed in the charts below:

Le français non-binaire : Innovations in Gender-Neutral Grammar

Grammatical Element	M/F forms	Proposed Gender-Neutral Forms
subject pronoun	il(s), elle(s)	**iel(s)**[4]
definite article & direct object pronoun	le, la	**læ/lo**[5]
indefinite article	un, une	**an**[6]
possessive adjective	mon, ma ton, ta son, sa	**maon** **taon** **saon**[7]
demonstrative adjective	ce, cette	**cet**[8]
demonstrative pronoun	celui, celle ceux, celles	**cellui** **celleux**[9]
disjunctive pronoun	lui, elle eux, elles	**ellui** **elleux**[10]

(Fondation Émergence, n.d. ; Knisely, 2020a)

In France, these alternative constructions as well as the strategies of *l'écriture inclusive* are currently contested in schools as they are feared to be confusing for children as they learn

to read and write (Buitekant, 2021). However, the diversity, newness, and flux of these forms is not a reason to exclude them from foreign language classrooms. On the contrary, introducing and discussing non-binary linguistic innovations with students can build awareness of language variation and the choices that we all make when we decide how to speak. Students can be encouraged to develop their own intentional strategies for self-expression, from employing strategies such as the alternation of gendered forms to inventing their own neologisms. These discursive strategies can be a powerful reminder of "the animacy of the French language" (O'Laughlin, 2019, p. 8) and the role that individuals within linguistic communities play in language evolution and reinvention.

5) Foster the collective queering of language learning in pursuit of gender justice.

In addition to these recommendations, a broader shift in perspectives is necessary. Knisely and Paiz (2021) argue that the cis/heteronormative fabric of classrooms can be challenged through the use of TAQIBPs (Trans-Affirming Queer Inquiry Based Pedagogy), which aims to: a) provide diverse and affirming representation of trans, non-binary, and queer identities in curriculum, b) value and include people of all gender and sexual identities into the learning space, and c) explicitly challenge assumptions and normative discourses through collective critical inquiry and reflection. As necessary as linguistic and pedagogical changes are, they will remain ineffective if not paired with efforts to dismantle systemic cisgenderism in society at large, local institutions, and individual consciousness. As Provitola (2019) states, "pronouns and gender-neutral language are the tip of the iceberg, and must be contextualized within structural efforts for trans justice both within and beyond the classroom" (p. 11).

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented the experiences of one non-binary adolescent navigating binary grammatical and social gender in a high school French class. In English, Ari successfully advocated for a discursive space to express their non-binary identity through verbal strategies such as stating their name and pronouns, educating others, and correcting misgendering. Faced with foreign language classroom contexts in which only two options for gender in French were presented, Ari exercised agency to choose between and re-envision the binary categories. When Ari's French teacher misgendered them in English and defended her actions by blaming Ari, Ari felt powerless and unable to assert their identity within the binary discursive categories imposed in the setting. Ari's experience of misgendering resulted in lasting anxiety, disengagement, and rejection of the French language. They gained empowerment through activism and mentorship in English and the ability to make choices and tell their story.

Given the limited data and small scope of the study, Ari's experience should not be viewed as generalizable to a broader population. More research is urgently needed to illuminate the specific linguistic challenges and possibilities that binary social and linguistic environments may pose to non-binary language learners, as well as the strategies for self-expression and resistance that learners employ in these contexts. Teachers can learn from these stories and take action toward more inclusive teaching practices: by educating themselves about gender and queer and trans linguistic activism; by respecting and defending students' right to be referred to in the way that they ask to; by promoting curious and creative conversations about gender in language; by teaching non-binary language to all students; and by advocating for gender justice in and out of the classroom.

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NOTES

[1] This paper uses *non-binary* as an umbrella term to encompass all of these identities.

[2] *LGBTQIA+* stands for the range of non-cisgender and non-heterosexual identities that include, but are not limited to, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual/aromantic. *Queer* is also used interchangeably as an umbrella term.

[3] The following transcription conventions are employed:

? indicates rising inflection

- indicates truncated speech

... indicates a pause

italics indicate emphasis by the speaker.

[4]Alternatives: *ael(s), aël(s), al(s), el(s)*, *em(s), ielle(s), ille(s), im(s), ol(s), olle(s), ul(s), ulle(s), yel(s), yelle(s), yol(s)* (Alpheratz, 2018; Ashley, 2019; Fondation Émergence, n.d.; Knisely, 2020a)

[5]Alternatives: *lae, læ, lea, li, lia, læ, lu* (Alpheratz, 2018 ; Ashley, 2019; Fondation Émergence, n.d.; Knisely, 2020a)

[6] Alternatives: *um, un·e* (Alpheratz, 2017; Fondation Émergence, n.d.)

[7]Alternatives: *man, tan, san; mi, ti, si; mo, to, so; mu, tu, su* (Alpheratz, 2018; Ashley, 2019; Fondation Émergence, n.d.; Knisely, 2020a)

[8]Alternatives: *cès, çu* (Ashley, 2019; Fondation Émergence, n.d.)

[9]Alternatives: *ceuxes, ceuzes, céal, çauz* (Alpheratz, 2018; Fondation Émergence, n.d.)

[10]Alternatives: *lu, auz* (Ashley, 2019)

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