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Beyond the Binary: L1 Strategies for Spoken Non-Binary French

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Linguistics

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Abstract

French, like other Romance languages, operates on a largely binary morphological gender system, leading to many potential linguistic complications when it is used to index social genders that fall outside of said binary (Michele 2016, Kaplan 2022). Certain morphosyntactic features of French specifically make accomplishing many non-binary (NB) marking strategies in speech all the more challenging. This paper presents an interview-based study conducted with 7 L1 French speakers living in France to assess what strategies are most commonly used in practice to describe a non-binary referent in speech. Through an elicitation exercise that prompted speakers to describe various stick figure-based images marked as having masculine, feminine, and non-binary gender, this study found that relative to descriptions of binarily marked figures, descriptions of non-binary figures had a higher frequency of constructions that avoid gender marking in speech and that employ impersonal subjects to contain gender marking to the grammatical level. These findings align with strategies proposed by Knisley (2022) and indicate that even to those largely unfamiliar with potential strategies for NB language, there are comprehensible and accessible strategies available to speakers that make use of the linguistic tools they already have at hand.

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1. Introduction

This thesis examines the phenomenon of spoken non-binary French with a focus on how it is currently being navigated by L1 French speakers who live with and are accustomed to speaking with binary social gender. As I will explain in more detail later, French, like other Romance languages, operates on a largely binary morphological gender system, leading to many potential linguistic complications when it is used to index social genders that fall outside of said binary (Michele 2016, Kaplan 2022). Throughout this paper, I will be using the term non-binary to refer to individuals who do not identify as exclusively male or exclusively female, noting as well that ‘non-binary’ is an umbrella term encompassing many other specific identities that fall within that broader category (Knisley 2020, National Center for Transgender Equality 2013). Non-binary people exist, and they deserve to be referred to in ways that align with their own personal gender identities that fall beyond a strict masculine/feminine binary; this makes the behavior of non-binary language in morphologically binary contexts a pertinent issue of study. This paper presents an interview-based study conducted with 7 L1 French speakers living in France to assess what strategies are most commonly used in practice to describe a non-binary referent in speech.

French is an Indo-European Romance language spoken by over 300,000,000 people across the globe, and its status as such a widely-used global language only adds to the urgency of understanding how actual inclusive non-binary language can be navigated within it (Ethnologue 2023). As it stands, there is no single universal or agreed-upon way to signal non-binary gender in French speech, which has made my experience speaking French as an L2 speaker all the more confusing when it comes to discussing issues of queer and non-binary identities that are very present in my personal life and communities.

I am an L1 speaker of American English and have lived in largely liberal/progressive communities within the United States for my whole life, meaning I carry my own conceptions of gender and its fluidity as a social construct that may not align perfectly with those of the overall population I am studying. I have studied the French language and francophone literature for six years now, and I have lived in immersive French-speaking environments for multiple extended periods of my life. I am also an L2 speaker of Spanish and have been exposed to more concrete and agreed-upon strategies for spoken non-binary language in Spanish speaking contexts than I have in French speaking contexts. As a queer-identifying L2 French speaker who is familiar with

the workings of inclusive and non-binary language in my own native language and communities, I wanted to investigate how to navigate this issue in another language context that is a large part of my life and work.

For these reasons, I am researching the ways in which non-binary French manifests in speech with the following central research question: what strategies are most commonly employed by L1 French speakers to verbally describe a non-binary referent? This thesis research approaches a complicated sociolinguistic question with the intention of providing more insight into some of the major ways in which spoken non-binary language is manifesting in the minds and linguistic behaviors of everyday L1 French speakers. Through this research, I hope to illuminate strategies and insights that will be helpful in better employing and teaching non-binary and inclusive French language practices in the long term. Beyond the scope of non-binary French as a specific phenomenon, I hope this work will provide further constructive insight into how social and morphological gender interact on a conversational level, as well as how we can better understand and accommodate non-binary gender in varied language settings.

1.1 Gender in French Morphosyntax

As is the case for many Romance languages, French is a morphologically gendered language wherein the vast majority of nouns, pronouns, and their corresponding adjectives are marked as having either masculine or feminine gender (Michele 2016). According to many scholars as well as *The Oxford Guide to the Romance Languages*, the grammatical gender of inanimate nouns and related words in these binary gender systems are assigned rather arbitrarily and do not carry much semantic weight (Michele 2016, Ayoun 2018). Ackerman (2019) defines grammatical gender as “the properties of words that allows the formal grammatical process of agreement to be carried out” (p. 4). Grammatical gender features are, notably, “properties of the morphemes themselves, and may be independent from the real-world biosocial genders associated with the referents” (Ackerman 2019, p. 4). The fact that the French phrase *la table* ‘the table’ is grammatically feminine, for instance, does not carry much social weight – speakers merely know that it is a feminine noun, and if they choose to add any further descriptive language, they must make sure it agrees accordingly in order to make a grammatical construction:

- (1) *La table est ronde* / **rond*
 The table.F is round.F / * round.M

Certain morphological features of *la table* ‘the table’ such as the feminine article *la* ‘the’ and the ‘e’ at the end of the noun typically indicate feminine grammatical gender in French, but again because of the arbitrary nature of inanimate noun marking, there is some debate as to whether these morphological features are always reliable indicators of grammatical gender (Ayoun 2017). Nevertheless, feminine forms being marked with *-e* endings as seen in (1) with *ronde* ‘round’ is an extremely common pattern in French, and becomes crucial in the phonetic marking of binary gender in speech (Kaplan 2022b). This is because it often causes the distinction between a pronounced final syllable (indicating feminine gender) and an unpronounced or open final syllable (typically masculine); in the case of ‘round’, the masculine *rond* is pronounced [Rɔ̃] and the feminine *ronde* is [Rɔ̃d].

While grammatical gender is assigned largely arbitrary in non-human contexts (Michele 2016, Ayoun 2018), the omnipresence of binary morphological gender features in French becomes more charged when it is used to index actual people. In Ackerman’s system (2019), conceptual gender and gender identity are clearly defined as separate from grammatical (or morphological) gender. Knisley (2020), among other scholars, notes that while grammatical and social gender are often conflated, social gender “refers to the lived experiences and performative identities of individuals, which may be related to or outside of constructions of masculinity and femininity” (p. 851). Social gender is thus its own entity outside of grammatical gender, but it becomes difficult in certain language contexts like spoken French to properly mark and respect social gender identities outside of a masculine/feminine binary that binary grammatical gender does not account for (Knisley 2020, Kaplan 2022, Abbou 2011). When we look at the noun for ‘student’ in French, for example, we run into this central issue, as there are two distinct forms of the noun – one, shown in (2), ends in an open syllable and ascribes semantically masculine gender to the student in question, and one, in (3), ends with a closed syllable and ascribes semantically feminine gender to the student in question:

- (2) Il est étudiant [et.y.djã]
 3.M.SG is student.M
 ‘He is a student’

(3) Elle est **étudiante** [et.y.djãt]
 3.F.SG is student.F
 ‘She is a student’

This pairing highlights how orthographic features of French often lead to difficulties in marking non-binary gender in French speech, as there is no single obvious middle ground between these distinct binary endings or widely known alternatives that break outside of the binary.

In recent decades, there has been an increase in the widespread use of what is called *l’écriture inclusive* ‘inclusive writing’ in French. *L’écriture inclusive* originated as an antisexist movement intended to push back against the overwhelming presence of generic masculine forms in the language and to visibly include women and people of non-masculine gender in written forms (Abbou 2011, Loison et al. 2021). As various studies and guides have established, inclusive writing practices in French tend to consist of writing out multiple gendered endings of a word, separating them with a dash, *point median* ‘midpoint’, or period¹, as follows: *un.e étudiant.e* ‘a^{M,F} student^{M,F}’ (EPFL 2022, Abbou 2011). This inclusion of multiple gendered endings for a marked article and noun does allow us to refer to a student without specifying their gender, a strategy which López (2019) would classify as Indirect Non-binary Language (INL). This means that instead of directly indexing a student’s gender, *un.e étudiant.e* avoids specifying it altogether by including multiple gendered endings at once. In order to use Direct Non-binary Language (DNL) (López 2019) and explicitly mark non-binary gender for a referent, one could pair a nonbinary neopronoun² such as the French *iel* with a double gender-marked noun, as such:

(4) **Iel** est **étudiant.e** [et.y.???)
 3.N.SG be.3.SG student.**M.F**
 ‘They are a student’

That being said, as the brackets next to *étudiant.e* in (4) indicate, *l’écriture inclusive* is unfortunately a strategy that primarily functions in written form, and there is no clear way to pronounce most words with multiple gendered endings in speech. Beyond just the issue of unclear pronunciation protocol, it is worth reiterating that inclusive French was not, in fact,

¹ Though various typographical conventions for inclusive writing exist, I will be using periods throughout this paper when separating multiple gendered endings.

² A neopronoun is a neologistic personal pronoun that goes beyond those previously codified in the language (that is, beyond *he*, *she*, and *they* in English, *il* and *elle* in French).

developed with the intention of being inclusive to non-binary identities, but rather to include women, and inclusive language is distinct from direct non-binary language (Ashley 2019).

Another feature to note about French is that it is not classified as a pro-drop (short for ‘pronoun drop’) language (Smith 2016), meaning that generally, it is ungrammatical for a clause in French to not contain a subject noun or pronoun such as those seen at the beginnings of (2)-(4). Because third person pronouns are marked with gender in French (Michele 2016), constructing sentences in a non pro-drop context³ adds a layer of difficulty to breaking out of the morphological binary – if you always need to include a subject, ascribing non-binary gender may require using a non-binary subject pronoun or a subject noun that does not carry undesired binary semantic gender. Though various neopronouns exist and are used by genderqueer French speakers (See Section 2.2), the current most common way to do this is through the non-binary third person subject pronoun *iel* seen above in (4), which combines the feminine third person subject pronoun *elle* ‘she’ and the masculine *il* ‘he’ (Knisley 2020). Though it is not officially recognized by the historically rigid language authority of the Academie Française, it has been steadily gaining recognition and popularity in the francophone world, even being added to the widely used French dictionary Le Robert in 2021 (Cheng 2021). Le Robert defines *iel* as a third personal pronoun that can be used to refer to “une personne quel que soit son genre” (‘a person of any gender’) (2021). In other words, *iel* can refer to an individual of non-binary gender (DNL) or refer to an individual or collective with unspecified gender (INL), and is increasingly accepted in French, though still labeled as “rare” in this dictionary entry (Le Robert 2021).

In order to assess what potential strategies exist for approaching spoken non-binary French in spite of all of these morphosyntactic challenges, Section 2 gives an overview of existing research and educators’ guides on the subject of non-binary language (in a handful of morphologically binary languages as well as in French specifically). After assessing the options proposed by educators and researchers that I will examine in Section 2, I will detail the methods of my own interview-based study in Section 3. Then, in Sections 4 and 5, I will assess the strategies actual L1 French speakers employ in practice to communicate non-binary gender in speech, and how these compare to strategies that remain within binary gender.

³ Section 4.2.3 elaborates more on pro-drop reminiscent behavior in my data as a potential strategy to avoid gender marking in spoken French.

2. Background

The past several decades have given rise to key research on the topic of non-binary language, especially in the context of morphologically gendered languages (Bershtling 2014, Papadopoulos 2019, Knisley 2020, Kaplan 2022, Stetie & Zunino 2022). An understanding of this previous research will act as a crucial foundation for exploring the state and behaviors of spoken non-binary French as a sociolinguistic phenomenon. While a limited amount of research has been done on the behaviors of non-binary French specifically, there have been a number of very insightful studies into how speakers of other morphologically gendered languages navigate non-binary language. I will begin by looking at examples of such studies before moving into the realm of French specifically.

2.1 Non-binarity in other languages

One of the more fertile grounds for research into non-binary language innovations is in the context of Spanish, a fellow Romance language with largely binary morphological gender (Michele 2016). Spanish is a particularly useful reference case because of the very similar behaviors of grammatical gender in Spanish and French (Michele 2016).

In a psycholinguistic study on the processing of non-binary morphological forms in Spanish, Stetie & Zunino (2022) reference this central issue of the social weight behind marking animate noun-class words with grammatical gender that exists in French as well:

“For nouns that refer to people, it seems undeniable that sociolinguistic and pragmatic factors are involved, as well as grammatical ones. There are epicene nouns (those nouns in which a single invariable form indistinctly refers to men and women and that do not require morphological changes to generate agreement, for example, *persona*, person, in Spanish). However, they are not a large number and most of the nouns that refer to people (and in general to animated entities) form gendered pairs” (p. 2)

In order to mark non-binary gender in words associated with a human referent in Spanish, a couple of morphological innovations have surfaced and gained traction in recent years. The primary forms, which were the two tested in Stetie & Zunino (2022), involve replacing the morphological gender marking *-o* (masculine) and *-a* (feminine) endings common in Spanish nouns with the non-binary variant endings *-x* or *-e*. Stetie’s & Zunino’s study was primarily concerned with comparing the processing of animate noun phrases that used either generic

masculine forms (e.g. *los maestros* ‘the^M teachers^M’) or non-binary forms (e.g. *les maestres* ‘the^N teachers^N’). This study found no statistical significance in the processing cost (reading and response time) that it took participants to assign referent groups between non-binary and generic masculine forms, indicating that these morphological innovations are generally comprehensible to speakers. They also note in their findings that there was not a difference between the processing of *-x* and *-e* when it came to the behaviors they were analyzing, but that their work was limited to specific written constructions, and that future study should investigate the distinct behaviors of the *-e* ending, which is the only one that is pronounceable in speech (Stetie & Zunino 2022).

Benjamin Papadopoulos’s thesis *Morphological Gender Innovations in Spanish of Genderqueer Speakers* goes into further depth as to which actual gendered (and non-gendered) forms are surfacing in the language of genderqueer Spanish speakers themselves. Papadopoulos most commonly observed the use of both of the two primary morphological variants mentioned above, describing how the *-x* ending has come into use in as a way to, in a sense, reject or remove morphological gender, and how the *-e* ending has found its function as marking a new gender category altogether in the language (2019). Papadopoulos (2019) elicited non-binary Spanish strategies from their participants through an image description exercise that was foundational to the research design of this study, as will be further detailed in Section 3.

The incorporation of non-binary neopronouns such as *elle* (López 2019) and noun/adjective forms into spoken Spanish offers an encouraging look at the possibility of navigating non-binary language in a binarily gendered Romance language. Still, major differences in the morphological and phonological systems between Spanish and French mean that the relative phonetic ease of accommodating an *-e* ending in Spanish is not necessarily replicable in French. This is likely due to the levels at which morphological gender is operating in each language; where in Spanish the gender distinction operates largely at the feature level as a choice between two vowel endings, previous works on gender marking in French propose that marking feminine gender is a result of adding a pronounced suffix to a masculine ‘base’ form – a process occurring not only at the feature level but also the realization level (Michele 2016, Riegel et al 2011). The former is a far less strict binary that allows for a third option (e.g., another vowel like *-e* as a morphological gender feature), whereas the latter binary (a pronounced suffix is either realized or not realized) is much harder to reconcile.

Outside of the realm of Romance languages, there are many languages with strict binary morphological gender systems, some that extend outside of only noun-class words and constructions. This includes Hebrew, a language with marked grammatical gender not only in third person pronouns, but first and second person constructions as well (Glinert 1989). In a 2014 interview-based study, Orit Bershtling investigated the very issue of navigating non-binary and genderqueer language in Hebrew. Bershtling interviewed six genderqueer Hebrew speakers about their lives and gender identities, paying extra attention to the ways in which they used the necessarily binary language of Hebrew to index and perform their own gender identities outside of the male/female binary. Strategies that Bershtling encountered included speakers switching between masculine and feminine forms, using the gendered form that is contrary to their perceived biological sex (a strategy echoed by genderqueer Canadian French speakers in a 2022 study by Jennifer Kaplan), and avoiding gendering altogether by making choices such as changing to an unmarked verb tense and deliberately avoiding pronouns. This last category of gender avoidance was, notably, described to be linguistically challenging by participants (Bershtling 2014). Overall, this study found that despite the seeming obstacle of a pervasive grammatical binary in their language, these genderqueer speakers were able to embrace the gendered morphology and manipulate it in ways that felt empowering and acceptable to their identities. As Bershtling puts it:

“The very linguistic rules that make genderqueer identities impossible can also expand, in many instances, the options for linguistic maneuvering outside of the binary. In a paradoxical manner, Hebrew’s insistent distinction between the feminine and the masculine bolsters genderqueer individuals’ positioning as neither women nor men” (2014, p. 36)

What this study and others like it tell us is that even in other language contexts where speakers are faced with binary grammatical gender that does not fully align with their own, there are always possibilities available to make grammatical gender work on a social level by subverting the binary it might suggest. In the case of some speakers, this may in fact look like embracing the grammatical binary while making choices that indicate their positioning outside of said binary on a social level.

Both Papadopoulous (2019) and Berstling (2014) were notably focused on the strategies of genderqueer speakers themselves, as were a good handful of the studies on French that I will

elaborate on in Section 2.2 and 2.3 below (Kaplan 2022, Knisley 2020). Because of this, I saw a gap in the research and wanted to see how the more general population of French speakers would approach the issue of non-binary French. This emphasizes French speakers who are not fully involved in the genderqueer community and thus may not be fully aware of all of the linguistic and discursive possibilities for non-binary French that exist. In other words, unlike previous works, this study investigates how everyday cisgender native French speakers conceptualize and approach this issue.

2.2 The social challenges of non-binary French

Before looking closely at the specific linguistic strategies used for non-binary French in Section 2.3, I will highlight some important works that underscore the social side of this issue and how genderqueer French people have gone about navigating it.

In a study published in 2022, Jennifer Kaplan presents a look into the ways in which non-binary French-English bilinguals code switch between their languages when discussing gender identity. Kaplan conducted interviews with six non-binary French-English bilinguals living in Montreal, Canada who have French as an L1 and English as an L2 (or L3). These interviews illuminate a phenomenon that the author deems binary-constrained code-switching, wherein a speaker will switch into their L2 (in this case English) because they feel that their L1 (French) lacks the appropriate linguistic tools (in this case, non-binary pronouns and marking gender agreement) to discuss their gender identities. Kaplan's participants express a common frustration with the linguistic barriers of conveying non-binarity in French as well as unfavorable attitudes towards non-binary language in French that are much easier to navigate in English. To this latter point, some interviewees discuss their perceived differences in the francophone vs. anglophone educational system and how they approach gender (though this is more specific to French Canada, a different speaker population from my own).

As far as the linguistic barriers, one interviewee discusses how French non-binary pronouns being neologisms causes more difficulty for learners than using an existing pronoun such as *they* and *them* in English. Kaplan notes a shared “sentiment that the complexity of non-binary French contributes to a steep learning curve, even for non-binary Francophones personally invested in adopting new grammatical systems” (2022a, p. 7). A central theme that comes up many times in this paper is the perception of French, an inherently gendered language,

as having a much stronger link between morphological gender and semantic/social gender than English does given the wider access to queer vocabulary and unmarked gender in English. One interviewee mentions that before they realized there were explicitly non-binary terms they could use in French, they would just ask to be referred to with masculine forms, but that this of course wasn't a perfect solution: "using masculine for nouns in French helped in the way that I am very often perceived as a woman, so it would kind of counterbalance it" (2022a, pp. 5-6). Similarly to Bershtling (2014), Kaplan (2022a) encountered several potential linguistic strategies for non-binary self-gendering of this variety. Despite the many complications and frustrations with regards to non-binary French that Kaplan's study sheds light on, she notes: "Participants who use non-binary French acknowledge that, despite the stigma they may face or the learning curve they have encountered in adopting new grammatical features into their everyday language, the sense of affirmation they feel using it makes the entire endeavor worth it" (2022a, p. 8).

Julia Speigelman's 2022 paper on discursive possibilities for non-binary learners in high school French classes explores the case study of one non-binary teenager, Ari, who studied French for many years. Through interviews with them, Speigelman paints a clear and informative picture of the struggles that this non-binary student has faced and, in all likelihood, shared with many other non-binary learners of French across the world. Some key points that this paper highlights include the shared misconceptions of French educators Ari has encountered, often who are insistent that there simply is no real "solution" or grammatical way to properly gender a student who does not wish to use the standard binary pronouns in French. An interesting point to note in this case study is how at a certain point, after being (mis)gendered as feminine in French classroom settings for years, Ari discovered a certain relief in using masculine forms as a more neutral-feeling alternative that still worked within the grammatical binary they were expected to be employing. The use of masculine forms (particularly when it comes to nouns and adjectives) to convey a more neutral sense of gender is an important concept that comes up in many papers on this subject such as Kaplan's (2022a) and will be discussed in my own participants' responses later in Section 5.3.2. Another major point of note in Speigelman's paper is how Ari notes the difficulty of picking up on new linguistic strategies in an already difficult language to learn – finding and practicing unfamiliar strategies in an L2 is tricky to navigate. Ari describes attempting to figure out how to use non-binary forms for themselves in French class as "scary," and "concludes that teachers need 'to do their own work'

researching non-binary language and making it available to students” (Speigelman 2022, p. 12). To this effect, Speigelman ends this paper by referencing works by Kinsley as well as other queer and allied scholars to encourage more inclusive practices for French educators in L2 classrooms.

2.3 Strategies for non-binary French

In 2020, Kris Knisley performed an online survey of 174 French speakers, 80 of whom self-identified as non-binary, to investigate what linguistic forms non-binary French speakers use themselves and what variations of said linguistic forms exist and are in use. The survey was 51 questions long, and included demographic questions, open-ended self-descriptions, and 17 pairs of questions about example sentences (one likert scale question asking participants to rate their understanding of the example, and one follow-up question asking participants to write their reactions to said example). In analyzing the 80 non-binary participants’ responses to the self-description elicitation questions, Knisley found uses of neopronouns including: *iel*, *ol*, *ul*, *yel*, *ille*, *em*, *im*, and *el*, as well as alternating uses of *il* and *elle* (the existing masculine and feminine third person pronouns) for a singular individual. When it came to testing comprehensibility, examples using *iel* were rated highest (most comprehensible) but *yel* was also almost entirely understood. Other neopronoun forms that departed more from an obvious combination of the existing binary were less well received. As far as gender agreement strategies were concerned, Knisley noted the following: “punctuated inclusive suffixes (IPS) that combine M and F ending pairs, -t as an alternative NB suffix, the absence of suffixation, and alternation between M and F forms of agreement” (Knisley 2020, p. 864). Knisley notes the limitations of this survey as a written medium, and makes the following statement about spoken strategies:

“Three principle adjectival strategies exist: (1) using adjectives that are invariable (e.g. *drôle* [funny]) or phonetically equivalent in their M and F forms (e.g., *gentil* [nice, M] and *gentille* [nice, F]), (2) paraphrasing to avoid adjectives that mark gender differentially, and (3) using the invariable *quelqu'un* [someone, M] or *une personne* [a person, F] as the subjects of the sentence and following traditional agreement with these words. For nouns, these same strategies are used to the extent that they can be effective. When ineffective, neologisms are created. However, NBPs [non-binary pronouns] displayed little consensus as to what forms these new words should take” (2020, p. 869)

Overall, Knisley explains that through this study, we now have a list of written and oral strategies for non-binary French used by NB speakers themselves, and that these strategies can and should be incorporated into L2 classroom environments to further inclusivity. As they put it: “Without these forms, NB speakers of a language with binary GG are forced to choose between two inflectional systems that both produce an equally violent erasure of their sense of self” (Knisley 2020, p. 872).

In another 2022 study, Jennifer Kaplan explored this same issue of what strategies are emerging in proposed grammars for non-binary French as well as in the speech of NB French speakers themselves. Kaplan observes and summarizes a variety of approaches to NB language in this work, many of which echo Knisley’s (2020) findings. Kaplan, like Knisley (2020), found that alternating binary forms is a viable strategy used by NB francophones, but explains that some of the speakers she interviewed perceived alternating forms as taxing and much preferred what she calls the compounding approach, where speakers find ways to combine existing binary endings, “such as *beaulle*, ‘attractive’ which is a blend of *beau* ‘handsome’ and *belle* ‘beautiful’” (Kaplan 2022b, p.10). Kaplan also mentions the possibility of using epicene forms in French, which are terms (typically nouns) whose form and pronunciation do not change regardless of the gender of the animate referent (e.g. *un^M adulte^N* and *une^F adulte^N*). The problem with epicene nouns, she notes, is that the choice of binarily marked articles and determiners they are paired with do often indicate the social gender of the referent anyway (Kaplan 2022b). This is a challenge with personal gender ascribing in my data that I will discuss further in Section 5.1.

Kaplan (2022b) also goes on to detail more of the systematic approaches to NB variant endings proposed in new grammars, primarily the work of queer francophone linguists Alpheratz (2017, 2018) and Ashley (2019). These grammars propose rules for forming neologistic NB variants of existing words in the French language using morphemes such as *-xe* as an NB singular marker and *-z* as an NB plural marker, as in the following:

- (5) *étudiant* /etydjã/ ‘student [masc]’
étudiante /etydjãt/ ‘student [fem]’
étudianxe /etydjãksE/ ‘student [neutral]’

(Kaplan 2022b, adapted from Ashley 2019)

Work on codifying a uniform approach to NB French grammar and its realization in speech is still underway, and though a singular consensus has not been reached on these neologistic forms, these works will be a useful foundation for future research and education.

Though not as incorporated into the academic and professional sphere, several useful online resources exist that echo the findings of previous research (Knisley 2020, Knisley 2022, Kaplan 2022, Speigelman 2022) and help to paint a wide picture of the many linguistic strategies that could exist in non-binary French speech. WikiTrans, a French-language resource about all things related to transgender identity, has a whole page about strategies for NB French, including examples of neologistic forms in line with what Alpheratz (2018), Ashley (2019), and Knisley (2020, 2022) propose. This page also notes some noteworthy ways to indicate NB gender marking in speech that I did not see in other resources, such as including a brief pause between multiple gendered endings to accentuate the presence of the *point median* in speech: ‘*l’étudiant.e* ‘the^N student^{M,F}’ would surface as [let.y.djã (...) t] (WikiTrans 2019).

In summary, there are a variety of strategic options available to French speakers when intending to verbally convey NB gender. Because I worked with a population who had less general familiarity with neologistic forms of NB French, I anticipated that my speakers would tend towards the strategies laid out by Knisley (2022) on their *Gender Just Language Education* website. This includes, in order of accessibility to the general (L1 and L2) francophone population:

1. Paraphrasing to avoid gender marking
2. Aurally neutral nouns and adjectives (e.g. *ami.e* ‘friend^{M,F}’ and *gentil.le* ‘nice^{M,F}’)
3. Using *quelqu’un* ‘someone’ or *une personne* ‘a person’ (impersonal constructions)
4. Neologisms

Surely enough, as I will discuss in Sections 4.4, 4.5 and the beginning of Section 5, constructions that avoided gender marking and constructions that used impersonal subjects such as *personne* ‘person’ were some of the most frequently used strategies in my data.

3. Methods

In order to investigate my central question of what strategies are most commonly employed by L1 French speakers from France to verbally describe a non-binary referent, I

conducted interviews with 7 L1 French speakers in which we discussed non-binary French more generally and then did an image-based descriptive language exercise. I conducted interviews as my method of study in order to most fully observe the many possible discursive and phonetic strategies associated with non-binary French.

Study participants were recruited via email and word of mouth throughout the summer of 2023 in Avignon, France. Participants included professors, summer program administrators, local workers, and more, with the requirements that they must be at least 18 years old and have French as an L1. Participants were all informed of the details of my study, (i.e., that I was conducting interviews about non-binary French that would include an image description exercise) but they were not shown any specific questions or images from the study ahead of the actual interview. Over the course of the summer, after obtaining informed consent from participants, I conducted interviews in person in the city of Avignon and recorded their audio. Audio recordings were taken on the voice memos app of my iPhone 14 and were transcribed manually by myself in ELAN. Interviews were conducted entirely in French, though participants were made aware beforehand that we could switch between French and English however they would prefer (with the exception of the descriptions they provided of each image, which needed to be in French).

The first portion of my interviews consisted of general demographic questions about each participant including age, gender, where they grew up, what languages they speak, and their level of familiarity with non-binary people and language. These background questions were as follows:

1. *Où avez-vous grandi ?*
'Where did you grow up?'
2. *Quelles langues parlez-vous ?*
'What languages do you speak?'
3. *Quel âge avez-vous ?*
'How old are you?'
4. *Si vous êtes à l'aise de partager, comment décririez-vous votre genre?*
'If you are comfortable sharing, how would you describe your gender?'
5. *Est-ce que vous connaissez personnellement des gens non-binaires ?*
'Do you personally know any non-binary people?'
6. *Avez vous de la familiarité avec le langage non-binaire en français ? Est-ce que vous l'utilisez ?*
'Do you have any familiarity with non-binary language in French? Do you use it?'

The second portion of each interview was a description elicitation exercise, the structure of which was modeled heavily after thesis research done by Papadopoulos (2019).

Papadopoulos's study involved presenting participants with images including a certain action and a certain subject with specific number and gender features (e.g., singular or plural, NB or gendered). These subjects were created from identical silhouette figures, and participants were asked to describe what was happening in each image, as well as how they would describe said subject if they were to have attributes such as being tall or blond. Through this methodology, Papadopoulos (2019) could assess similar questions to my own, observing which linguistic constructions were most commonly employed by participants in spoken descriptions.

In my study, participants were shown a sequence of ten images that they were then asked to describe (in a short story, a few phrases or sentences – however they saw fit). Each image contained a stick figure in a certain situation (e.g., sitting at a desk) or exhibiting some emotion (e.g., smiling, confused) with symbols in the corner denoting how that particular version of the figure should be gendered (masculine, feminine, or non-binary)⁴. Each image was shown at least twice, with no alterations made to the actual image other than its associated gender marking symbols being changed. The variants of each image were shown in sequence – see Figure 1 below for the first three images I showed each participant. See the Appendix for all of my images in one place and in sequential order.



Figure 1. Each iteration of the *student* image (masculine, feminine, and non-binary)

⁴ None of the images contained features outside of the standard circular head and stick body that have an iconographic association with gender (e.g. the triangular bodies commonly placed on women's restroom signs). That said, certain features and actions that participants could take from these images may have certain stereotypically gendered associations, such as muscular figures being more commonly associated with men/masculine people. This added layer of complexity is addressed in Section 6.1.

Participants' descriptions were transcribed by myself manually in ELAN, glossed, and categorized according to the linguistic strategy/strategies employed for each image. Based on the choices I saw surfacing in my background research on literature proposing strategies for non-binary French, I expected to see participants employing a variety of linguistic strategies, including:

1. Binarily gendered pronouns
2. Non-binary neopronouns
3. Epicene nouns
4. Marked gendered nouns
5. Aurally neutral adjectives
6. Gendered adjectives
7. Verb phrases with a gendered subject
8. Verb phrases with an impersonal subject
9. Impersonal phrases

Because the descriptions I collected varied in length and often employed more than one linguistic strategy within them, I did not categorize responses based on linguistic choices at the parts of speech level with labels like those in the above list. I instead noted what linguistic constructions were being used and then categorized each descriptive response as performing one or more of the following three major overarching functions:

- A. Ascribing personal gender to the figure
- B. Employing impersonal gender
- C. Avoiding gender altogether

I will go into greater detail about what exactly constitutes a response as falling under these categories at the beginning of Section 4, using specific responses I received to illustrate these choices. This data categorization approach is intended to help me assess which variety of linguistic strategies came up the most in spoken descriptions, as well as which strategies were most frequently used for gendered figures vs. non-binary figures.

The final portion of each interview was dedicated to any last open-ended discussion and/or questions that the participants might have had at the end of our conversation. These last sections of each interview were often very insightful and allowed me to collect further conversational data surrounding the topic of non-binary French as a whole. Common themes and

takeaways from these conversations will be shared in Section 5.3, and will be central to considering the larger implications of my research.

4. Results

4.1 Participants

Table 1 below summarizes the demographic data I collected about each participant. For the duration of this paper, I will refer to my participants with the labeling format seen in the top row of Table 1, where P1 stands for “Participant 1,” and so on.

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7
Age	49	60	52	40+ ⁵	23	37	22
Gender	M	F	F	M	M	F	F
Other languages (fluency and study)	English	English, Spanish, Italian, German	English	English, Spanish	English, Spanish	English, Spanish, Italian, German, Georgian	English, German, Japanese
Knows NB people?	Impersonally	Impersonally	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Region of France	Paris	Le Vaucluse (Avignon)	Le Vaucluse	Le Vaucluse	Nîmes	Paris	Orléans

Table 1. Distribution of participants' demographic data

Participants' ages ranged from 22 to 60 years old and were well distributed, with at least one participant in each of the encompassed decades. Within my participants there was a fairly even split of people who identify as men and women, all cisgender, with only one speaker who mentioned having questioned his gender in the past but who concluded that he feels comfortable with the masculine gender he was socialized in. All participants had French as an L1, as the study required, and they all spoke English or had studied it to some extent and with varying degrees of fluency. Spanish was the most commonly spoken language among participants beyond French and English. When asked if they personally knew non-binary people, my three

⁵ P4 did not specify his age, but stated that he was over 40

youngest participants said yes, two participants did not, and two of my participants explained that they had met non-binary in academic and professional contexts, but that they did not interact with non-binary in their personal everyday lives (denoted as ‘impersonally’ in Table 1).

More qualitative features about each participant such as their level of familiarity with non-binary language as well as their involvement in anglophone, academic, and queer spheres will be addressed as pertinent in Section 5.

4.2 Data categorization

Each descriptive response I received ranged from a short phrase to a few sentences, and almost every response used a combination of various linguistic features, meaning it would be very difficult to categorize responses solely based on, for example, whether they used a verb construction or a noun/adjective-based construction. Instead of starting at that level of detail, I have divided every response I received into three major categories based on whether they include:

- A. constructions that ascribe personal gender to the figure (including marked pronouns, nouns, adjectives)
- B. constructions that contain impersonal gender (marked gender agreeing with words like *personne* ‘person’ and other impersonal constructions), and
- C. constructions that avoid gender altogether (using a verb construction with an impersonal subject, choosing aurally neutral adjectives, topic pro-dropping before verbs)

Most responses fell into more than one of these categories (e.g., speakers sometimes included a gendered subject pronoun and then later switched to an impersonal subject noun like *personne*, classifying that response as employing both personal and impersonal gender). Within each of these three overarching categories, I will look more closely at what specific linguistic strategies speakers used to achieve them through a handful of example responses.

I will then present the responses I received across images, paying particular attention to the frequency of each of these three categories based on the gender of the image. Later, in Section 5, I will consider the implications of how these overall categories are distributed across genders, as well as unpack certain special cases, participant trends, and meta-linguistic commentary from participants on some of the choices and common themes that came up in my responses.

4.2.1 Personal gender

The first overarching category that I have grouped descriptions into includes any construction that ascribes marked gender to the stick figure being described. This ascribed personal gender could be explicitly masculine, feminine, or non-binary (which was the least common of these options, but which did appear in a handful of responses and will be incredibly pertinent to address). What ascribing personal gender tends to look like by my categorization aligns with what are very standard French descriptive structures, such as using marked pronouns, nouns, and adjectives, as seen in (6), or using verb constructions with a marked subject (noun or pronoun), as seen in (7):

(6) *Elle* *est vraiment très heureuse.*
she.3.F is really very **happy.F**

(P6 re: Image F)

(7) *Il* *s'interroge sur qu'il est ?*
he.3.M is wondering about who-**he.3.M** is ?

(P6 re: Image D)

Essentially, ascribing personal gender includes any morphological construction that allows the speaker to conclude things about the social gender of the subject being described. Largely, this meant the use of marked pronouns, nouns, and adjectives, as well verb constructions with a personally marked subject noun or pronoun. Example responses (6) and (7) above, of course, are using binarily marked personal gender – that is, the subject being described in each is clearly being gendered as feminine and masculine, respectively.

When it came to ascribing non-binary personal gender in these responses, I noted a handful of interesting responses whose structures echoed a very common structure we see in ascribing binary personal gender: using marked pronouns and adjective constructions. Example response (8) demonstrates this type of subject + adjective structure in a non-binarily marked way:

(8) *Uh, iel* *s'interroge,* *ehh ... est* *perdu.e*
 Uh, **they.3.N.SG** wonder, uh ... be.3.SG **lost.M.F**⁶

(P7 re: Image E)

More detail about these examples as well as the attempts at ascribing personal gender to the non-binary (NB) images that did not remain fully non-binary will be described in my breakdown of responses to the NB images in Section 4.5.

4.2.2 Impersonal gender

The second major category that descriptive constructions can fall under are ones that include marked gender, but where the gender is simply agreeing with the grammatical gender of a stand-in subject word as opposed to being ascribed to the actual person in the image. The morphological gender that surfaces is instead being accorded with a stand-in subject word, which is in almost every case in my data the feminine noun *personne* ‘person’, and is thus almost universally feminine. In example response (9), for instance, we see the audibly marked feminine adjective *forte* ‘strong’ [fɔrt], which is only marked to agree with the feminine morphological gender of *personne* ‘person’:

(9) *C'est une personne très forte.*
 This-is **a.F** **person.F** very **strong.F**
 ‘This is a very strong person’

(P6 re: Image J)

I only saw one instance of the other common impersonal subject word *quelqu'un* ‘someone,’ a generically masculine stand-in subject NP, and surprisingly, it was not, in fact, paired with impersonal masculine gender marking. Instead, it was paired with a verb construction to avoid gender marking altogether, and the marked pronouns that appeared later in the response were feminine, reflecting the ascribed personal gender of the feminine stick figure in the image (see 4.6.3, Image F). This response will be detailed below as (11) in Section 4.2.3.

⁶ As I will discuss later, the non-binary personal gender marking strategy works throughout this whole example because this is an aurally neutral adjective – the masculine *perdu* and feminine *perdue* are pronounced the same, so it is not binarily marked in speech.

4.2.3 Avoiding gender altogether

The final category of linguistic strategies I saw in my descriptive responses includes maneuvers that evaded gender marking altogether. The most common way that speakers avoided marking gender (in 14 out of 21 genderless constructions) was by employing verb constructions with an impersonal subject like *personne*, as seen in the following response excerpt:

- (10) *C'est* ***une*** ***personne*** *qui* ***va*** *à* *l'université*
 this-is **a.F** **person.F** who **goes.3.SG** to the-university
 ‘This is a person who is going to university’ or ‘This is a university student’
(P1 re: Image C)

The vast majority of impersonal verb constructions I saw in my responses used *personne* ‘person’ as their stand-in subject NP, but I did see one instance of the generically masculine *quelqu’un* being used as the impersonal subject of verb phrases:

- (11) *C'est* ***quelqu'un*** *qui* ***sourit,*** *qui* ***ne s'étonne pas,***
 This-is **someone** who **smiles.3.SG,** who **is not surprised,**
puisqu'elle ***a pas*** *les bras relevés ...*
 because-she.3.F.SG **doesn't have** raised arms ...
 ‘This is a person who is smiling, who isn't surprised because she doesn't have raised arms’
(excerpt from P2 re: Image F)

As previously mentioned, the description in (11) does go on to use marked feminine personal pronouns, ascribing personal gender to the figure to reflect the feminine markings paired with that image variant (see 4.3.3, Image F).

One noteworthy linguistic strategy I saw that avoids gender marking in speech specifically is the use of aurally neutral adjectives. As described in Section 2.3, aurally neutral adjectives are adjectives whose pronunciation does not vary between gendered forms, often because the the masculine ‘base’ form ends with a vowel, so the addition of the feminine *-e* ending does not change the pronunciation of the open final syllable. This strategy only appeared twice to explicitly maintain neutrality, as the adjectives were modifying the non-binary neopronoun *iel*:

- (12) *Uh, iel* *s'interroge,* *ehh ... est* *perdu.e*
 Uh, **they.3.N.SG** wonder, uh ... be.3.SG **lost.M.F**⁷
 ‘Uh, they wonder, uh ... are lost’
 (P7 re: Image E)
- (13) *Uh, iel* *est* *musclé.e,* ...
 Uh, **they.3.N.SG** be.3.SG **muscular.M.F** ...
 ‘Uh, they are muscular’
 (excerpt of P7 re: Image J)

Because the adjectives shown here in (12) and (13) would be pronounced exactly the same in their masculine and feminine forms (*perdu, perdue* → [pɛrdy]; *musclé, musclée* → [myskle]), the adjective choices avoid gendering the referent in any way. Of course, this choice doesn’t exist in a vacuum in my data – these two instances were each paired with the marked non-binary pronoun *iel*, meaning the adjective itself is avoiding gender, but the overall response does also end up ascribing personal non-binary gender.

Another subcategory of gender avoidance strategies I observed is what I will be referring to (albeit loosely) as topic pro-dropping. Pro-dropping is short for ‘pronoun dropping’, and can be described as “a feature of some languages that do not require an overt argument, especially a subject, to be present in a clause” (Holmstedt 2013). French and English are both examples of non pro-drop languages (Smith 2016, Holmstedt 2013), meaning an argument such as a subject noun or pronoun is required in clauses, as demonstrated below:

- (14) *speaks.
 (15) She speaks.
 (16) **parle.*
 *speak.3.SG.
 (17) *Elle* *parle.*
 she.3.F.SG speak.3.SG.

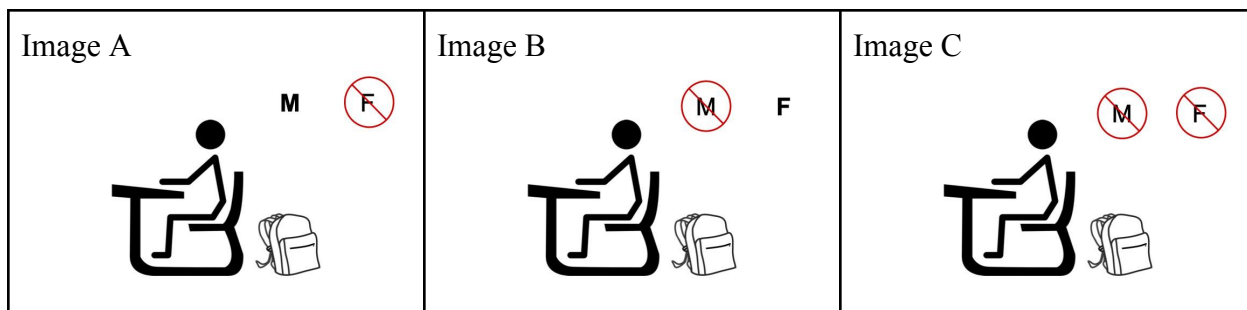
Pro-drop behavior is not entirely rigid across languages, and some languages allow for what is referred to as topic-dropping, where in certain environments with enough context, the topic or subject of a sentence that has been previously established can be omitted (Holmstedt 2013). It is

⁷ I have chosen to gloss double-marked adjectives in this paper with the ‘M.F’ ending as opposed to the ‘N’ marker I have given *iel* because I cannot claim that these adjectives are actually neutral in French. Orthographically, they must be marked as masculine, feminine, or a combination of the two, it just so happens that combining the endings of these particular adjectives appears to be neutral in speech.

true that in my response data, the absence of subject pronouns and nouns could also simply be chalked up to a speech disfluency or particular speech patterns that allow for something reminiscent of topic dropping, where because the subject is clear, speakers don't feel they need to reiterate a subject noun or pronoun. Regardless of what technical label is most appropriate for what I observed in speech, it is noteworthy to see this happening in French, a language that tends to very strictly require the inclusion of subjects. Example (12) above has an example of this behavior, as a marked pause in the middle of P7's response leaves the final (grammatically incomplete) clause *est perdu.e* 'is lost' standing alone. More examples of possible topic pro-dropping will be elaborated throughout Section 4.3.

4.3 Image responses

4.3.1 Images A-C: STUDENT



In Images A and B, when the student image was binarily gendered, all seven responses used constructions that ascribed personal gender to the figure. By and large, this was done by using marked pronouns and adjectives, as seen in (18), and marked nouns that ascribe social gender to the referent, as in (19):

- (18) *Ben, il est assis ...*
 Well, **he.3.M.SG** is **seated.M** ...

(excerpt of P7 re: Image A)

- (19) *C'est une élève, hein ? Pareil, ou une étudiante,*
 This-is **a.F student.N**, right? Same, or **a.F student.F**,
uh, une jeune fille ...
 uh, **a.F young.F** **girl.F** ...

(excerpt of P2 re: Image B)

When the figure was non-binary (Image C), three responses ascribed personal gender to the figure, but only one clearly kept the semantic gender of the figure fully non-binary. The two participants that ascribed binary social gender to Image C were confused as to what nouns they could use to describe this figure, and alternated between semantically masculine and feminine nouns, as seen below:

- (20) *Un garçon, un homme, une femme, peut-être, qui*
a.M boy.M, a.M man.M, a.F woman.F, maybe, who
est assis, et ... qui travaille ...
 is seated.M, and ... who works ...

(excerpt of P4 re: Image C)

The only participant that ascribed personal non-binary gender to Image C did so as follows:

- (21) *Et là, uhh, de manière assez naturelle j'utiliserais "iel," et je dirais que, c'est um ... un ou une étudiant.e [pronounced "étudiante"], uh et pour, à l'oral, j'aurais le tendance d'utiliser "élève" plus que "étudiant" puisque y'a moins le cas, euh ... y'a pas, y'a moins le "e" féminin rajouté qui est trop ... trop important à l'oral.*
 ‘There, uhh, somewhat naturally I would use *iel* (3.N.SG), and I would say that, this is um ... **a.M** or **a.F student.F.M** [pronounced as F], uh and for, verbally, I would tend to use [this other form of] **student.N** more so than **student.M** because there’s less the case of, uh ... there’s not, there’s less the feminine ‘e’ added that is very, very important in speech’

(P7 re: Image C)

Interestingly, this was the only instance I saw of a participant attempting to verbally replicate what we might see in inclusive writing (writing out the multiple separated endings of *un.e étudiant.e* to designate a non-binary student or a student of unspecified gender), and they ended up doing so by alternating both forms of the article *un.e* ‘a’, but then pronouncing the word *étudiant.e* with a closed final syllable like the feminine form because of the implied presence of the *-e* added to the end. The participant made a notable effort visually when saying *étudiant.e* and even drew the word out for slightly longer than normal to indicate that they were not simply intending to say the feminine form of the word, which may be reminiscent of the pausing/emphasis strategy proposed by WikiTrans (2019).

The use of marked impersonal gender to agree with a stand-in subject (*personne* ‘person’) appeared in three responses to Image A, zero responses to Image B, and in three

responses to Image C. One of said impersonally gendered response constructions to Image C is as follows:

- (22) *C'est aussi **une personne assise** à un bureau. Donc voilà, j'utilise bien le mot '**personne**' pour pas qualifier son genre, qui est, uh, ben apparemment le non-binaire.*
 'This-is also **a.F person.F seated.F** at a desk. So yeah, I am using the word '**person.F**' to not qualify their⁸ gender, which is, uh, well apparently non-binary.'
 (P5 re: Image C)

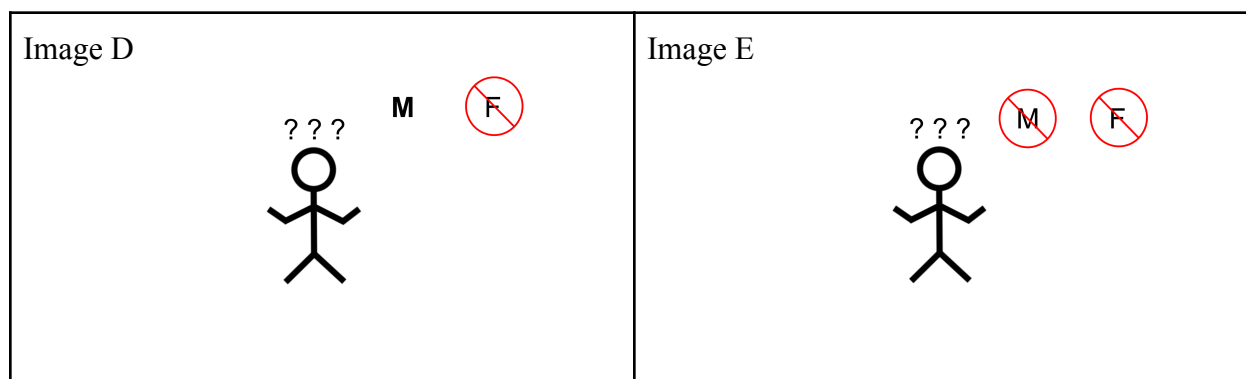
Interestingly, one response to each of these three images contained a potential instance of topic pro-dropping. These responses are shown below. Note that these Images (A, B, and C) are gendered as masculine, feminine, and non-binary, respectively:

- (23) *C'est une personne qui est assise ... on dirait qu'il tape. Et ... derrière il a un sac à dos. **[implied il] travaille.***
 This is a person.F who is seated.F ... it looks like he is typing. And ... behind he has a backpack. **[implied he] is working.**
 (P3 re: Image A)
- (24) *Uh, cette personne de sexe féminin est assis [sic] à une table. Et uh, **[no subject pronoun] a** aussi un sac à dos.*
 Uh, this.F female person.F is seated.M [sic] at a table. And uh, **[no subject pronoun]** also **has** a backpack.
 (P6 re: Image B)
- (25) *Cette personne de ... genre non-binaire est assise à une table, et **[no subject pronoun] a** aussi un sac à dos dans le coin.*
 This.F person.F of ... non-binary gender is seated.F at a table, and **[no subject pronoun]** also **has** a backpack in the corner.
 (P6 re: Image C)

Responses (24) and (25) were both given by Participant 6 (P6), meaning this tendency may speak to something particular about her speech patterns more so than anything. Regardless, as explained in Section 4.2.3, this is a somewhat surprising linguistic behavior to see happening in French.

⁸ Possessive pronouns are not marked in French based on the gender of the subject, but rather agree with the object, which in this case is *genre* 'gender', a masculine noun. For this reason I am simply transcribing possessive pronouns in accordance with their image's gender markings, which in this case is NB.

4.3.2 Images D & E: CONFUSED/QUESTIONING



Six out of seven participants ascribed personal masculine gender to the figure in Image D, using morphologically and semantically marked nouns such as *un homme* ‘a man’, *un monsieur* ‘a gentleman’, and *un garçon* ‘a boy’, as well as masculine personal pronouns such as in the following response:

- (26) *Il s'interroge sur qu'il est ?*
he.3.M.SG REFL-questions about who-**he.3.M.SG** is ?
 ‘He is wondering who he is ?’

(P6 re: Image D)

In response to Image E, there were once again three responses that included marked personal gender, one of which used a couple of binarily gendered pronouns before adjusting away from that and opting for impersonal gender strategies:

- (27) *Ben il se cherche, il se-- elle--*
 Well **he.3.M.SG** REFL searches, **he.3.M.SG** REFL-- **she.3.F.SG--**
cette personne sait pas ... si elle est
 this **person.F** knows NEG ... if **3.F.SG⁹** is
femme ou si elle est homme ...
 woman.F or if **3.F.SG** is man.M ...
 ‘Well he is searching himself, he– she– this person doesn’t know ... if they are a woman or if they are a man’

(excerpt of P3 re: Image E)

⁹ I have transcribed these two last instances of the third person singular pronoun *elle* as *they* in the final translation, because they are not actually ascribing social gender to the referent at this point in the utterance and are merely agreeing with the feminine subject noun *personne* ‘person’ introduced before them. I will do the same in future examples that employ the same strategy.

The other two of these responses to Image E used the pronoun *iel* to mark non-binary gender:

- (28) *Uh, iel s'interroge sur son identité ?*
 Uh, **they.3.N.SG** are-questioning-themself about their identity?
 (P6 re: Image E)
- (29) *Uh, iel s'interroge, euh ... est perdu.e*
 Uh, **they.3.N.SG** wonder, uh ... be.3.SG lost.M.F
 'Uh, they wonder, uh ... are lost'
 (P7 re: Image E)

Only one response to Image D used impersonal gender through *personne* constructions. In this case, we see P5 using feminine personal pronouns to agree with the initial feminine subject *personne* later in his response even though Image D was marked as masculine:

- (30) *C'est une personne qui se pose des questions,*
 That-is **a.F person.F** who REFL poses some questions,
elle a un petit point d'interrogation en dessus d'elle.
3.F.SG has a little question mark above **PREP-3.F.SG**
 'There, that's a person who is questioning themselves, they¹⁰ have a little question mark above them'
 (excerpt of P5 re: Image D)

Two out of seven responses employed impersonal gender constructions for Image E, and both appeared through a similar structure as seen above in (30), where the grammatically feminine pronoun *elle* appeared after the initial subject was established as *personne*:

- (31) *cette personne sait pas ... si elle est*
 this **person.F** knows NEG ... if **3.F.SG** is
femme ou si elle est homme ...
 woman.F or if **3.F.SG** is man.M ...
 'this person doesn't know ... if they are a woman or if they are a man'
 (excerpt of P3 re: Image E)

¹⁰ See previous footnote

- (32) *c'est une personne qui se pose aussi des questions. Euh ... elle est peut-être non-binaire, ou intersexe ...*
 This-is **a.F** **person.F** who poses himself also some
questions. Uh ... 3.F.SG is maybe non-binary, or intersex ...
 ‘This is a person who is also questioning himself. Uh ... they are maybe non-binary, or intersex ...’

(excerpt of P5 re: Image E)

In their responses to Image D, three participants used the following construction, which pairs *personne* as an impersonal subject with a verb to avoid gender marking:

- (33) ... *c'est une personne qui se pose des questions ...*
 ... this-is **a.F** **person.F** who **REFL poses** some questions ...
 ‘This is a person who is questioning himself’

(used by P1, P5, and P7 re: Image D)

Three responses used the same structure as seen above in (33) to describe Image E (the NB variant), pairing *personne* with a verb to describe the action of the person questioning himself without marking gender at all in those phrases. In addition to pairing *personne* with verbs, I also saw three responses to Image E avoid gender by enacting what seems to be a topic or pro-drop. These instances of missing pronouns are noted below, in the bolded positions where there was no clearly pronounced subject pronoun in a place one would typically expect to hear one to create complete phrases:

- (34) *Ben il se cherche, il se-- elle-- cette personne sait pas ... si elle est femme ou si elle est homme, si, voilà, [?] sait pas. [?] se pose des questions.*

‘So he is searching, he– she– this person doesn’t know ... if they are a woman or if they are a man, if, yeah, [?] don’t know. [?] are questioning [themselves?].’

(P3 re: Image E)

- (35) *C'est une personne ... voilà, on ne sait pas. ... [?] se pose la question.*

This is a person ... well, one doesn't know ... [?] asks [themselves?] the question

(P4 re: Image E)

- (36) *Uh, iel s'interroge, euh ... [?] est perdu.e*
 Uh, they.3.N.SG wonder, uh ... [?] be.3.SG lost.M.F
 ‘Uh, they wonder, uh ... [?] are lost’

(P7 re: Image E)

Finally, one response employed an aurally neutral adjective (*perdu.e* ‘lost^{M.F}’) to avoid gender marking after establishing NB personal gender through the subject pronoun *iel* – this choice is shown above in (36).

4.3.3 Images F & G: HAPPY/SMILING



Upon seeing Image F, all seven participants used constructions that ascribed personal gender to the figure, such as the following:

- (37) *Uh, elle est vraiment très heureuse.*
 Uh, she.3.F.SG is really very happy.F

(P6 re: Image F)

These personally gendered constructions largely corresponded with the indicated feminine gender of Image F, but two participants (P3 and P4) began describing the image as if it were masculine before they acknowledged that the symbols did not indicate they should be doing so.

As was the case with many of the non-binary images, P3 and P4 used terms that ascribed binary personal gender to the NB figure in G, alternating between masculine and feminine pronouns and adjective forms for lack of a clear sense of non-binary options to employ:

- (38) *il semble ... qu'il se sent homme ou femme, ben ... Il a fait le bon choix. Fin-- elle est heureuse-- ou il est, il est heureux ou heureuse !*

It looks like ... whether-he.3.M.SG feels REFL man.M or woman.F, well ...

he.3.M.SG made the right choice. That is– she.3.F.SG is happy.F– or he.3.M.SG is, he.3.M.SG is happy.M or happy.F !

‘It looks like ... whether he feels like a man or a woman, well ... he made the right choice. That is– she is happy– or he is, he is happy^M or happy^F!’

(P3 re: Image G)

One participant did mark non-binary personal gender for Image G, opting to pair *iel* with the technically masculine adjective form of the word *happy*:

- (39) *Iel* *est* *content*
they.3.N.SG be.3.SG **happy.M**
 ‘They are happy’

(P7 re: Image G)

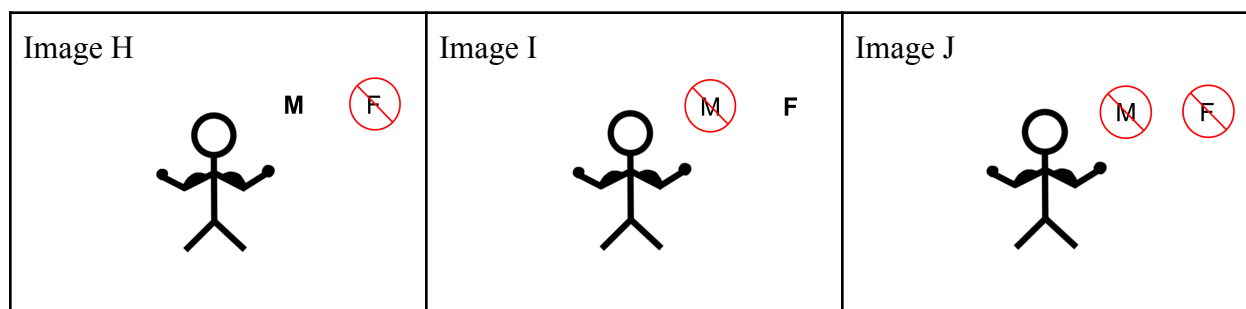
Two responses to Image F used *personne*-based constructions with correspondingly feminine adjectives and pronouns. Three responses to Image G did the same.

Two responses to Image F paired impersonal subjects with verbs, avoiding gender marking in that construction. One response to Image G did the same:

- (40) ... *une* *personne* *aussi* ... *qui* *sourit* ...
 ... **a.F** **person.F** too ... who **smiles** ...
 ‘... also a person ... who is smiling ...’

(excerpt from P2 re: Image G)

4.3.4 Images H-J: STRONG/MUSCULAR



All seven responses to Image H ascribed marked masculine gender to the figure, and all six¹¹ responses to Image I ascribed feminine gender to the figure. Only one participant directly ascribed non-binary personal gender to the figure in Image J:

- (41) *Uh,* *iel* *est* *musclé.e,* *iel* *est* *fort*
 Uh, **they.3.N.SG** are **muscular.N,** **they.3.N.SG** are **strong.M**

(P7 re: Image J)

¹¹ P3’s response to Image I was not counted in my data because she never actually described the image directly, instead grouping it with the masculine variant shown before (Image H).

One participant ascribed masculine social gender to the non-binary figure in Image J, by simply saying that he could not conceptualize that figure as anything besides a man:

- (42) *Je pense que la majorité des gens-- moi, je parle pour moi, mais ça... on trouve ça un homme.*
 ‘I think that the majority of people– me, I speak for me, but that... one finds that a **man.M**’

(P4 re: Image J)

Two out of seven participants employed impersonally gendered constructions in response to Image H, and only one participant did so with Image I. Three responses to Image J used impersonally gendered *personne* constructions, pairing *personne* with the feminine forms of *forte* ‘strong’ and *musclée* ‘muscular’, as seen below:

- (43) *Une personne qui est aussi, uh, [laugh] ... très forte.*
A.F person.F who is also, uh [laugh] ... very **strong.F**.
 ‘A person who is also, uh [laugh] ... very strong’

(P1 re: Image J)

- (44) *C'est une personne très forte.*
 This-is **a.F person.F** very **strong.F**.
 ‘This is a very strong person’

(P6 re: Image J)

- (45) *C'est aussi une personne très musclée ...*
 This-is also **a.F person.F** very **muscular.F** ...
 ‘This is also a very muscular person’

(excerpt of P5 re: Image J)

Only one participant used an aurally neutral adjective in their response to Image J, which is shown in the gloss of (45) above through the use of *musclée* ‘muscular’. One other response used an ungendered construction in response to Image J by pairing *personne* with verb phrases:

- (46) *c'est une personne ... qui semble avoir gagné quelque chose,*
 This-is **a.F person.F** ... who **seems to have won** something,
ouais, et qui, qui a fait preuve de force ...
 yeah, and who, **who has shown** strength ...
 ‘This is a person ... who seems to have won something, yeah, and who, who has shown strength’

(excerpt of P2 re: Image J)

4.4 Comparing overall numbers

Below in Table 2 is the overall tally of how many constructions from each category I collected in response to my images, sorted by gender. A number of the responses I received that used constructions with personal gender used words that carried a different gender than the one indicated by the symbols with that image, and many of these responses used forms that indicated more than one variety of social gender. For this reason, in the Personal Gender column, I have included a breakdown of which gendered forms I saw in my responses in addition to the total number of responses that attempted to ascribe personal gender. In Section 5.1, I mention certain kinds of constructions that were unclear or difficult to categorize due to such difficulties in correctly indexing personal gender.

	Personal Gender	Impersonal Gender	No Gender
Masc. Images (21 total responses)	20 (95%) 20 Masc, 1 Fem	6 (29%)	5 (24%)
Fem. Images (20 ¹² total responses)	20 (100%) 20 Fem, 4 Masc	3 (15%)	3 (15%)
NB Images (27 total responses)	15 (55%, 33% NB) 9 NB, 6 Masc, 2 Fem	11 (41%)	13 (48%)
Total (68 responses)	55 (81%)	20 (29%)	21 (31%)

Table 2. Number of responses that contained constructions using personal, impersonal, and no gender per image subcategory

4.5 Personal gender with NB images

Because it is the intersection of my data that most directly responds to how spoken non-binary language may be manifesting in French, the following figure breaks down how exactly participants responded to NB images with constructions that carried personal gender.

¹² In two cases, participants failed to give any direct description of an image presented to them and instead diverted to other commentary. This is why there is one fewer response to the F images and one fewer response to the NB images counted towards my overall data than anticipated.

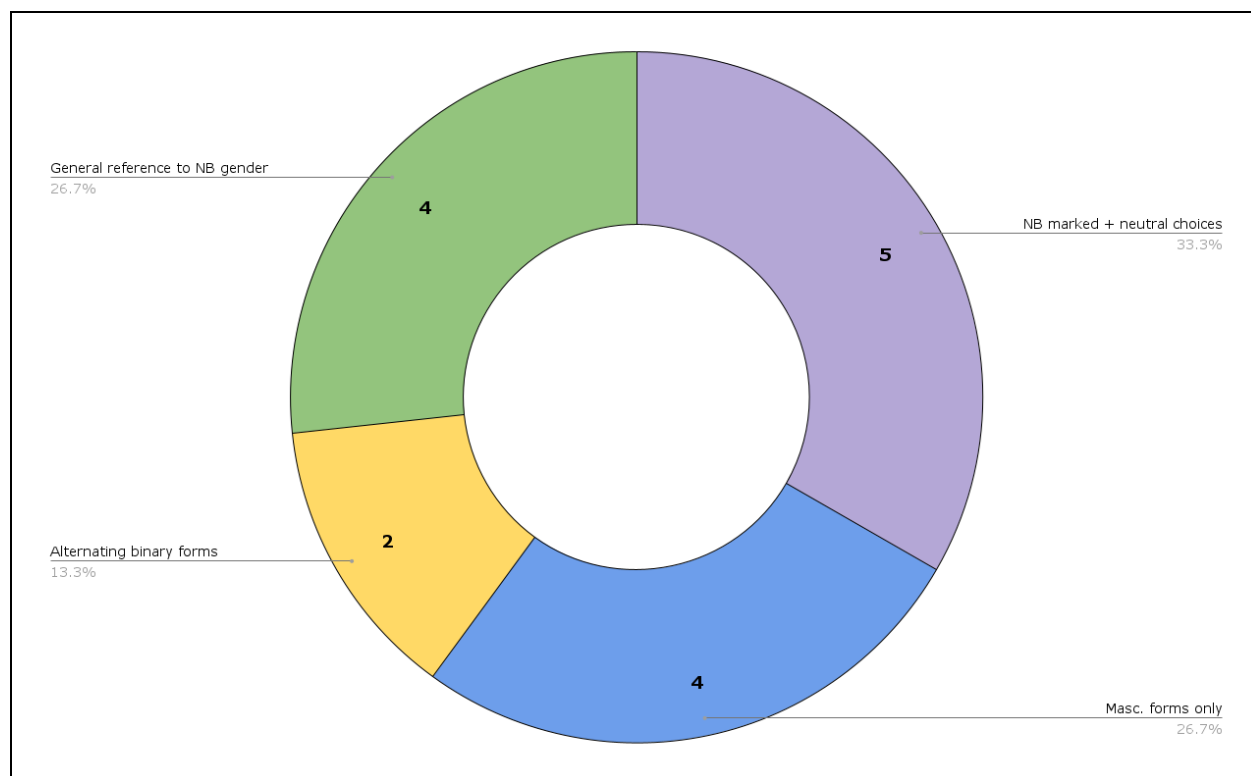


Figure 2. Breakdown of personally gendered constructions and the number of responses to NB images that contained them

Nine total responses were able to describe the NB figure without fully misgendering them. Five (seen above in purple) did so by using marked NB forms (*iel*) and making intentional choices with the rest of their language to maintain neutrality (either by using aurally neutral adjectives, masculine adjectives that they claimed to be neutral, or by avoiding gender marking altogether in the rest of the description). Four (seen above in green) remained removed or impersonal but made general reference to the figure having non-binary social gender with phrases like *une personne qui est non-binaire* ‘a person who is non-binary’. Four responses (above in blue) used marked masculine pronouns and nouns, ascribing masculine social gender to the figure more overtly than any responses in purple that only used masculine adjectives in combination with marked NB pronouns and a clear intention of remaining neutral. Two more responses (above in yellow) did the same, but used marked feminine nouns and pronouns in addition to masculine ones (e.g., *un homme, une femme, peut-être* ‘a man, a woman, maybe’), indicating that said participants (P3 and P4) did not know how to remove their personally gendered constructions from a gendered binary when describing the NB figure.

In this section, I have detailed the categories of linguistic strategies I saw in all of my response data as well as how these strategies were distributed across images and genders. Section 5 will unpack trends in my data and common themes I saw emerging in my interviews in order to begin assessing what this study can tell us about spoken non-binary French.

5. Discussion

When looking at the overall distribution of participant responses (see Section 4.4, Table 2), a number of trends emerge. First, we can see that constructions ascribing personal gender prevailed as the most common category across all responses. This reinforces what seems to be a logical pattern in language: when speakers are aware of the personal gender of the person they are describing and they are willing and able to use forms that index said gender, they will do so as a very standard practice. In other words, marked nouns, pronouns, adjectives, and the like remain the most standard way these L1 speakers went about describing people in spoken French. That said, there was a notable decrease in constructions that ascribed personal gender to the NB images compared to the amount of personally gendered constructions used to describe the binarily gendered images.

Although constructions that ascribed personal gender were numerically the most frequent category appearing in response to the NB images as well, not all of these constructions successfully remained outside of the masculine/feminine binary, resulting in misgendering in a handful of cases. A more detailed breakdown of how personal gender appeared in response to NB images is presented in Section 4.5 above, but once the actual alignment of responses with personal gender is counted, only a third of them actually successfully used personal gender in an acceptable way for a NB figure, making personal gender the least common successful type of linguistic strategy when it came to the NB images.

Constructions that avoided gender marking altogether were the second most common category overall, as well as the most common successful strategy used to describe NB images. Though constructions avoiding gender marking appeared a handful of times in response to the binarily gendered images, they appeared in nearly half of the total responses to NB images, demonstrating a stark increase in this strategy as an approach to describing a non-binary referent.

Constructions ascribing impersonal gender (all through the use of *personne* ‘person’ as a stand-in subject) were also prominent across the board, following non-gendered constructions

very closely in number. Also like non-gendered constructions, impersonally gendered constructions were used a handful of times in response to the binarily gendered images, but were used far more frequently for the NB images, appearing in about 41% of those responses.

There is a noteworthy reversal happening in this data distribution: where ascribing personal gender was by far the most common and successful strategy employed by participants to describe masculine and feminine images, it was only successfully used in 33% of the responses to NB images, being surpassed by non-gendered constructions and impersonal gender marking as the most frequent descriptive approaches (appearing in 48% and 41% of responses, respectively). This seems to indicate a very interesting shift that happened in the minds of my participants – where the choice to ascribe personal gender to the stick figure came quite easily and frequently when a binary gender could be used, the choice to avoid gender marking altogether or to add a layer of impersonalization took over as most frequent when binary personal gender was no longer acceptable. I will touch on the possible implications of this frequent use of *personne* and impersonal gender marking in Section 5.3.1.

To the point of this study, the most common strategy L1 speakers successfully used to describe non-binary referents within this data was relying on constructions that avoided gender marking. This was closely followed by impersonal gender marking, and the least frequent approach was to ascribe non-binary personal gender to the figure (primarily through the use of the non-binary third person pronoun *iel*).

In the following subsections, I will break down special cases in my response data that were difficult to categorize and that point to some interesting choices that speakers made. I will then discuss noteworthy trends I observed in individual participants and highlight certain common themes that came up in my interviews, which indicate several important points of discussion that will be crucial in considering the issue of spoken non-binary French as a practice and the future of non-binary French education.

5.1 Special cases

As I mentioned in Section 4.4, I collected a number of descriptive constructions in my data that I was uncertain exactly how to count, as they ascribed personal gender either in ways that did not align with the image's gender marking symbols or in ways I did not expect. This section is dedicated to explaining what exactly these descriptive choices were, because they

highlight some particularly interesting linguistic choices and features that further demonstrate just how blurred the lines of grammatical gender and personal gender can be in actual speech.

One primary place I faced this issue was with classifying certain nouns (and their corresponding articles) that are intended to be neutral, but that technically still might ascribe personal gender to the referent. The main place this came up was in response to the variations of my first image (of a student), as there are several possible nouns that participants could choose from that would generally translate to *student*, all with varying degrees of marked social gender. As I explained in Section 1.1, the noun *étudiant* ‘student’ is clearly marked in orthography and speech as being either masculine (*étudiant* → [etydjã]) or feminine (*étudiante* → [etydjãt]). For this reason, a handful of participants opted for another noun, *élève*, which can also be translated as *student* but, as P1 explained to me, it often refers to younger students (i.e., in primary school). P1 and P7 both mentioned in their responses to the student images that they would choose to use *élève* as opposed to *étudiant/e* because it is an epicene noun, meaning that it is one of a handful of nouns in French that does not change in spelling or pronunciation regardless of grammatical gender:

D'accord, donc c'est un étudiant, si je comprends bien. Un élève, qui est une forme neutre, mais qui est ... pour les personnes du primaire et du secondaire. (P1 re: Image A)
OK, so this is a^M **student**^M, if I understand correctly. A^M **student**^N, which is a neutral form, but which is ... for people in primary and secondary school.

À l'oral, j'aurais le tendance d'utiliser 'élève' plus que 'étudiant' puisque y'a moins le cas, euh ... y'a pas, y'a moins le 'e' féminin rajouté qui est trop ... trop important à l'oral. (excerpt of P7 re: Image C)

Verbally, I would tend to use ‘**student**^N’ more than ‘**student**^M’ as there’s less of the case, uh, there’s not, there’s less the feminine ‘e’ added that is very ... very important in speech.

That being said, the problem with epicene terms arises when we look at the articles they are presented with, as they tend to be gendered (Kaplan 2022b). Referring to a person as *une élève* ‘a student’, for example, still appears to ascribe feminine social gender to said student because of the use of the feminine article *une* (which is pronounced differently than the masculine *un*). Thus, when P1 gave the following two descriptions for my first two images (masculine and feminine students, respectively), I was unsure whether I could count his use of *un élève* ‘a

student' in (47) as actually being neutral (avoiding gender), despite his metalinguistic commentary on the choice:

(47) *D'accord, donc c'est **un étudiant**, si je comprends bien. **Un élève**, qui est une forme neutre, mais qui est ... pour les personnes du primaire et du secondaire.*

'OK, so this is **a.M student.M** if I understand correctly. **A.M student.N**, which is a neutral form, but which is ... for people in primary and secondary school.'

(P1 re: Image A)

(48) *Une étudiante, ou **une élève**, s'il s'agit d'une personne du primaire ou du secondaire encore une fois.*

'**A.F student.F**, or **a.F student.N**, if this is a person in primary or secondary school again.'

(P1 re: Image B)

Because we immediately see P1 switch to using the feminine *une élève* 'a student' to describe the image marked as feminine in (48), I felt that despite his intentions, P1 was still ascribing a minor degree of masculine social gender to the figure in the first (masculine) image. Notably, P1 did not opt for this supposedly neutral noun in his response to the NB version of the student image, instead relying on the impersonal *personne* 'person' as a subject and an unmarked verb construction to avoid personal gender entirely:

(49) *Et, ben, c'est **une personne qui va** à l'université, ou **qui va au**, à l'école primaire ou au collège ou au lycée ...*

'And, well, this is **a.F person.F who is going** to university, or **who is going** to, to primary school or to middle school or to high school ...'

(P1 re: Image C)

The other noun for *student* that surfaced and was interesting to note was *un écolier*, a noun that does in fact have a feminine variant: *une écolière*. Strangely, though, this only came up once, and it was used in its masculine form to describe the feminine version of the student image:

(50) *C'est la même sauf que là c'est **femme**, c'est ça ? ... Mais là c'est exactement – comme tu dis, ça peut être **un écolier**, euh, voilà.*

'This is the same except that here it's a **woman.F**, right? ... But it's exactly – like you're saying, that could be **a.M student.M**, uh, yeah.'

(P3 re: Image B)

Unexpected cases such as these indicate that even in the minds of L1 speakers, there seems to be some confusion surrounding the degree that theoretically marked nouns are actually ascribing personal gender to their referents.

A handful of instances in the descriptions given by P5 were difficult to classify as either ascribing personal gender or relying on impersonal gender. This is because P5 often would employ a *personne* ‘person’ construction, adding a layer of impersonalization between the subject and the referent of the sentence, but then complete the phrase in a way that does ascribe some indication of social gender:

- (51) *Inversement, c'est **une personne** musclée aussi, **qui se genre au féminin**.*
 Inversely, this-is **a.F person.F** muscular.F too, **who REFL genders.3.SG in-the feminine**
 ‘Inversely, this is a muscular person^F too, **who genders himself as feminine.**’
 (P5 re: Image I)
- (52) *c'est **une personne** qui, uh, se considère comme un homme, **qui se genre au masculin**.*
 This-is **a.F person.F** who, uh, REFL **consider.3.SG as a.M man.M**, who REFL **gender.3.SG in-the masculine**
 ‘This is a person^F who, uh, considers themselves to be a man, **who genders themselves as masculine.**’
 (P5 re: Image H)
- (53) *c'est **une personne** qui se sent, euh, à l'aise dans son corps, avec qui elle est. Et **qui se genre au féminin**.*
 This-is **a.F person.F** who REFL feel.3.SG, uh, at the-ease in POSS body, with who 3.SG.F is. And **who REFL gender.3.SG in-the feminine**
 ‘This is a person^F who feels, uh, comfortable in their body, with who they are. And **who genders themselves as feminine.**’
 (P5 re: Image F)

Even though P5 relied so heavily in these instances on using *personne* as an impersonal subject and paired it with verb phrases (both ways of leaving out grammatical gender), he still included information about the figure’s gender identity in the end that carry semantic and social weight. Ultimately, I decided to count these constructions as ascribing personal gender, even though they do so in a very roundabout way. Because I counted all of these responses as ascribing either masculine or feminine social gender, I did also ultimately decide to count responses where P5

made reference to a figure being non-binary as ascribing non-binary social gender, even if the language was not extremely direct.

5.2 Participant trends

5.2.1 Potential social influences

In order to get a fuller sense of the ways in which my participants responded to the task of using non-binary language in French, I have noted a number of social factors that most likely influenced their knowledge and perceptions of the subject.

Firstly, the majority of people I interviewed were involved in the academic sphere to some degree, either actively pursuing education at the Master's level and/or working as a teacher/professor. This included P1, P5, P6, and P7, who, incidentally, were the only participants I saw mention or use the non-binary pronoun *iel*. P2 has been involved in the administrative side of academic programs for many years, meaning she has had some exposure to NB students and language, but engages with it far less directly than those mentioned above who are current students and teachers that have witnessed it appearing in the classroom setting in more recent years. P1 and P5 both even mentioned a desire to teach inclusive language more extensively in their classrooms (at an American liberal arts college and in French primary school, respectively). P3 and P4 were my two participants who were the least involved in the academic sphere at the time of our interview, and who reported themselves as having the least familiarity with NB people and language practices.

Familiarity with NB people and language was another major influence that I made note of. P5, P6, and P7 were the three participants who indicated that they personally knew NB people and had a decent amount of familiarity with NB language (or for a lack of complete understanding of what that phrase meant, they all indicated understanding that NB neologisms are coming into use in French and were familiar with inclusive language practices more generally). Surely enough, these three participants were the only ones to successfully ascribe personal non-binary gender to the NB images in my study.

Of course, age was another correlated factor – P5, P6, and P7 were all under the age of 40, and it follows that my youngest participants were more familiar with NB people and language and more comfortable incorporating NB forms into their spoken descriptions.

One final factor that is worth noting is my participants' exposure to English-speaking spheres, which may influence their level of understanding of how non-binary or gender neutral language functions in a language context where these things are largely perceived as more frequent and accessible (Kaplan 2020a). My participants who reported the highest degree of English fluency and involvement in anglophone spheres were P1 and P6, both of whom have lived for extended periods of time in the United States.

5.2.2 Individual response patterns

Participant 5 was a local worker in the city of Avignon who was in school to become a teacher. He was relatively young (23 years old) and one of my participants who was most involved in queer spaces in his own personal life. His responses are noteworthy in that even when images were presented with binary gender markers, he still opted to use impersonal *personne* constructions in every response. This was interesting to observe, because it meant that the verbally marked gender that came through in his responses skewed overall very much towards feminine forms, but they were almost entirely impersonal and in agreement with *personne*. It also meant that P5 went to somewhat of an extreme, refusing to directly and personally gender the images even when it was permitted. He also made several references to the concept of identity, self-gendering, and being cautious of misgendering other people throughout our interview, clearly indicating that he is conscious of the importance of respecting people's pronouns and desires for being grammatically gendered a certain way. P5 only used the non-binary neopronoun *iel* once, and it was after the elicitation exercise during our discussion of the tepid reception of non-binary pronouns among the more general French-speaking population. In response to the phenomenon of people denying the viability of *iel*, he stated:

C'est un peu ... voilà, c'est moins se prendre la tête, en fait. Je dirais que moi, si une personne se sent, euh, ni masculin ni féminin ou tout simplement les deux, ben, il y a ce pronom qui existe et pourquoi pas l'utiliser ? (P5)

It's a little ... yeah, it's less fuss, really. I would say personally that, if a person feels, uh, neither masculine nor feminine or simply both, well, there's this pronoun that exists and why not use it?

When I then prompted him to demonstrate how he might construct a sentence using *iel* for the last image in the study (Image J, NB, muscular)¹³, P5 provided the following response:

(54) *Iel* *est* *fort*
 3.SG.N is **strong.M**

This description of the final image was shared with a segment of P7's response to the same image, and it pairs the marked masculine form of the adjective *fort* 'strong' with the non-binary neopronoun *iel*. This combination reflects both participants' conception that the masculine adjective sounds more neutral, and can feasibly be used with NB forms when a marked adjective is what the speaker decides to use. See Section 5.3.2 for more commentary on this phenomenon of using masculine forms as 'neutral'.

Participant 7 was another interesting case, as not only did she demonstrate and commentate on this conception of masculine forms as seeming more neutral, she also exceptionally used constructions that ascribed personal gender to the figure in every image – even the NB images. P7 was my youngest participant, who is still in school and thus very involved in the academic sphere with fellow people her age (many who identify as queer). P7 was overall the most inclined to use the non-binary pronoun *iel* in her responses and indicated a clear level of comfort with it. She used *iel* in all four of her responses to NB images, ascribing personal NB gender each time. She paired three of these responses with strategies that avoided gender marking to remain neutral, also employing a couple of masculine adjective forms in an effort to be neutral (see these responses as well as P7's commentary on the masculine as neutral in Section 5.3.2).

Participants 3 and 4 were the least familiar with non-binary people overall, and were the furthest removed from both the academic sphere and English-speaking environments. As a result, both were largely confused about the concept of non-binarity itself, and in our more general conversation had much more to say about issues related to generally (and binarily) transgender people and sexism than the central focus of my research. Regardless, their responses provide useful insight into where a large portion of the L1 French speaking population over a certain age

¹³ Because this utterance happened in our conversation after the elicitation exercise and was thus more directly elicited than letting the participant make an in the moment choice about describing someone, I did not count it towards my overall numbers as a construction ascribing personal NB gender. Nevertheless, it is an important utterance to note.

still is in their understanding of the issue at hand, and it also allows us to see what people unfamiliar with linguistic possibilities for non-binary French might think to do when tasked with avoiding binary gender. One other thing to note about P3 and P4 is that I interviewed them at the same time due to logistical constraints, which definitely slightly changed the nature of the descriptive responses I was able to gather from them. As I will note in Section 6.1, having them both in the same room made it even more difficult to understand the motives behind some of their choices. These two both exhibited instances of pro-dropping in response to the NB figure in Image E, for example, but I cannot fully tell if this was conditioned by their own personal discomfort and uncertainty as to which pronouns they could use so much as it was a result of the interview being more conversational and them occasionally cutting each other off and talking over each other.

5.3 Common themes

The following subsections are dedicated to noteworthy phenomena that came up in multiple interviews and that speak to key aspects of how we might move forward in our consideration of non-binary French as a whole.

5.3.1 Frequency of *personne*

One major trend in participant responses that I have already noted was the very high frequency of using *personne* ‘person’ constructions. Though *personne* could be used to employ impersonal gender, to avoid gender, and appeared a couple of times in a more generic usage without any descriptive strategy attached, it appeared in a total of 35 responses (about 51% of all of the responses I counted). This was a bit surprising, as it did not seem to be a primary strategy in the literature I encountered with suggested strategies. As I described in Section 2.2, Knisley (2022) does note that impersonal constructions with *personne* ‘person’ and *quelqu’un* ‘someone’ are a helpful way to avoid personally gendering a non-binary referent, but I would have anticipated more variety in the impersonal constructions people employed than I ended up seeing. *Quelqu’un* ‘someone’, for example, only came up in one response, compared to the immense number of uses of *personne* ‘person’ as an impersonal subject (whether or not impersonal gender marking was also used). As discussed in Section 5.2.2 above, one participant even used *personne* in every single one of his image descriptions. It is possible that the extremely high incidence of *personne* could be due to the use of stick figures as the basis of my

images, which may have prompted a cognitive association with the word *personne* in French (though the most common french terms for ‘stick figure’¹⁴ do not actually contain the word *personne*). This image format may have also made participants more inclined to structure their responses around ‘what this person is doing’, though I cannot be sure (see Section 6.1 for more on study limitations relating to this image format).

That being said, during our discussions, a couple of participants commented on their choice to use *personne* so frequently in a more general sense:

En fait moi j'aime bien l'idée de dire 'une personne' aussi parce que ça désigne quelqu'un qui peut être un homme, une femme, ou un non-binaire. (P2)

Actually I really like the idea of saying ‘a person’ too because it designates someone who may be a man, a woman, or a non-binary person

Parce que ['une personne'] c'est le meilleur moyen en français d'utiliser, en fait. (P6)

Because [‘a person’] is the best approach to use in French, really.

ben là je dirais que c'est aussi une personne assise à un bureau. Donc voilà, j'utilise bien le mot "personne" pour pas qualifier son genre, qui est, uh, ben apparemment le non-binaire. (P5, re: Image C)

Well there I would say that this is also a person^F seated^F at a desk. So there, I’m using the word ‘person’ to not qualify their gender, which is, uh, apparently non-binary.

Clearly, there is a shared sentiment among many participants that *personne* is the most suitable term they could think to categorize someone outside of the binary (as opposed to *homme* ‘man’ or *femme* ‘woman’), and it allows for a layer of separation between the gender of their language and the actual person being described.

This layer of impersonalization that happened when participants so often chose to use *personne* constructions is noteworthy, and begs the question of a larger trend. Theories on agreement hierarchy based on the work of Corbett (1979) such as Steriopolo’s work on Russian sex-differentiable nouns (2018) have proposed that gender exists on various levels in discourse: first at the grammatical level (a morphological feature of the noun itself), and at the semantic and discourse level above that (based on the social gender of the referent). What we are seeing here with the use of *personne* to control gender agreement in these descriptions could very be

¹⁴ The most common translations of the phrase I encountered included *bonhomme allumette* or simply *bonhomme*, and *chiffre bâton*.

indicating a level of intuition in these speakers about how a certain agreement hierarchy can be of use to them; when gender at the semantic/discourse level broke out of the binary, speakers inserted a noun (*personne*) that does not carry semantic gender but does carry grammatical gender, which they could then simply use to place feminine agreement at the top of the agreement hierarchy.

The frequency of *personne* responses in my data could very well point to a tendency for speakers to fall back on defined morphological gender agreements as a sort of failsafe. In other words, when faced with the uncertainty of how to index the personal gender of the person they are describing, participants often chose, through using the feminine noun *personne* as their subject, to avoid gendering the referent while still relying on a concrete binary gender agreement structure that feels comfortable and familiar on a grammatical level. This shift was noticed by several participants, but most explicitly remarked by P2, my oldest participant, who commented the following:

Là maintenant, à la réflexion, j'ai-- autant j'ai dit 'c'est un homme, il...', 'c'est une femme, elle...', mais je, je crois pas, uh, avoir utilisé un pronom sujet pour parler de cette personne [non-binaire]. Chaque fois j'ai dit 'cette personne ...' (P2)

Now, thinking back, I– as much as I said ‘this is a man, he...’, ‘this is a woman, she...’ I, I don’t believe I, uh, used a subject pronoun to talk about this [NB] person. Every time I said ‘this person...’

P6 also asked me if it was okay that she used *personne* so frequently, and a few other participants chuckled at themselves as they realized they were using *personne* for a noticeable number of images. Overall, the high tendency for using *personne* in descriptive responses aligns with previous findings that this is a consistently viable option for neutral/non-binary language in French (del Caño 2019, Knisley 2022).

5.3.2 Masculine as ‘neutral’

Although I began my description elicitation exercise by explaining to participants that they should avoid using binary forms in their descriptions of NB figures, I recorded many instances of masculine forms of nouns and adjectives being used in a way that the speakers perceived as neutral, which warranted some discussion on the matter. In many grammatical contexts in French, the masculine acts as a ‘default’ gender (Ayoun 2007, Tudisco 2021). French

also exhibits a feature of many Romance languages (Michele 2016) that is reinforced by the Académie Française in the statement: *le masculin l'emporte sur le féminin* ‘the masculine prevails over the feminine’ (quoted in interviews by P1 and P2). This means that when something (like an adjective) is agreeing with multiple words of varied gender, it takes the masculine form. These features of the language as well as the aforementioned¹⁵ historic lexicographical conception that feminine forms are created in French most often by affixing marked suffixes to a masculine ‘base’ form (Riegel et al 2011) may be contributing to several participants’ assertion of the masculine form as a neutral option in speech.

As indicated in Section 5.1, there is some debate surrounding the level of personal gender certain marked nouns carry, especially in their masculine forms. This came up when P1 claimed that *un élève* was a fully neutral term even though he switched to *une élève* for the feminine variant of the same image (see Section 5.1), suggesting that perhaps the masculine form with the masculine article is in fact generally perceived as more neutral than the feminine form. In other words, it is possible that other speakers would agree with P1 in that the masculine form feels applicable to a semantically masculine referent as well as an unspecified or non-binary referent, whereas the choice to mark feminine gender by changing the article from *un* to *une* is only acceptable for marking semantically feminine gender. A similar conception might be in effect in P3’s response to the NB variant of the student image (Image C), which she described with the masculine noun *un écolier* ‘a student’ or ‘a schoolboy’.

Where masculine forms as the more ‘neutral’ option appeared most explicitly, though, was when participants were forced to verbally mark adjectives. In his response to the NB variant of the smiling image, P5 made the choice to switch from the feminine form of *contente* ‘happy’ to the masculine form after making a general statement to index the figure’s non-binary social gender (this statement is the underlined portion below):

- (55) *Et là, c'est **une personne** qui est très **contente** dans son corps, qui est à l'aise avec elle-même, et uh, qui est non-binaire et qui est **content** de l'être, qui a su se trouver.*
 ‘And there, that’s a^F **person**^F who is very **happy**^F in their body, who is comfortable with themselves, and uh, who is non-binary and who is **happy**^M to be, who knew how to find themselves.’

(P5 re: image G)

¹⁵ See Section 2.1

At one point, P6 broke out of feminine agreement after establishing the feminine *cette personne* ‘this person’ as a subject and marked a masculine form, perhaps just as a simple speech error, or perhaps as if to remain generic in some way despite the feminine marking of *personne*:

- (56) *Uh, cette personne de sexe féminin est assis à une table. ...*
 ‘Uh, **this^F female person^F is seated^M** at a table. ...

(excerpt of P6 re: Image B)

Of course, when using the non-binary neopronoun *iel* to mark personal NB gender, participants who used adjective-based descriptions were faced with the decision of how to mark these endings, and if the adjective did not happen to be aurally neutral like *musclé.e* ‘muscular’ in (58), participants always chose to mark these adjectives as masculine, as seen in (57)-(59):

- (57) *Iel est content.*
they.3.N are happy.M

(P7 re: Image G)

- (58) *Uh, iel est musclé.e, iel est fort*
Uh, they.3.N are muscular.N, they.3.N are strong.M

(P7 re: Image J)

- (59) *Iel est fort*
3.SG.N is strong.M

(P5 re: Image J¹⁶)

Though the conception of masculine forms as feeling neutral came up in a few of my conversations, such as with P5 as seen above in (59), P7 was the participant who had the most to say about the matter:

uh ... mais j'aurais tendance à utiliser le masculin, uh, pour essayer, éviter-- pour faire comme s'il y avait pas de marque, en fait, de genre. Mais euh, mais c'est pas la meilleure solution, uh, et c'est toujours un peu compliqué. Voilà. (P7)

uh ... but I would tend to use the masculine, uh, to try to avoid– to act like there wasn't any marking, in fact, of gender. But uh, but this isn't the best solution, uh, and it's always a bit complicated. Yeah.

¹⁶ As mentioned in Section 5.2.2, this was a response I prompted from P5 during our post-exercise discussion, so even though it did not count towards my overall numbers of spontaneous descriptive choices, it is still worth noting.

Oui, je pense qu'il y a une conception du masculin comme étant le neutre qui peut être questionnée, hein ? Qui est vraiment bizarre, uh, mais c'est peut-être plus simple comme ça. Uh, parce qu'effectivement, quand on va accorder au masculin, comme on va pas rajouter des syllabes, y'a un peu cette idée qu'on n'a pas modifié le mot, donc on reste dans un sorte de neutralité. Mais euh, mais du coup ce qu'il y a à questionner, c'est l'histoire même de la langue et comment on a défini cette base comme étant le masculin.
(P7)

Yes, I think that there's a conception of the masculine as being neutral that could be questioned, right? Which is really bizarre, uh, but it's maybe more simple that way. Uh, because effectively, when we go to agree in the masculine, since we're not adding syllables, there's a bit of this idea that we haven't changed the word, so we're staying in a sort of neutrality. But uh, but then what there is to question is the very history of the language and how we defined this base as being the masculine.

Considering this trend, my interview data seems to support the idea that French speakers often conceptualize feminine forms as more marked than masculine forms. For this reason, although the use of masculine forms as neutral is not a perfect solution and still technically remains within the binary, the choice to default to masculine forms (especially when it comes to adjectives) may feel most acceptable to L1 speakers as indicating non-binary/neutral gender when their back is against a wall. This may be especially true when speakers are unfamiliar with neologistic non-binary adjective forms such as those suggested by newly proposed inclusive grammars (Alpheratz 2018). This sentiment that masculine forms often feel less marked on the level of social gender aligns with findings expressed by certain genderqueer Franco-anglophone speakers in previous research (Kaplan 2022a, Tudisco 2021), but is not a universal solution for all non-binary people who may well still be uncomfortable being perceived as socially masculine.

5.3.3 Multiple gendered forms

Though it has not come up very explicitly in a lot of my background research, it is important to re-emphasize that non-binarity is a spectrum, and in many real-life circumstances, one may not need to avoid any gendered forms whatsoever to appropriately refer to a non-binary person (which was the primary challenge I presented to my participants for my NB images). In other words, as a few of my participants noted, many non-binary people use multiple pronouns and are comfortable being referred to with a variety of gendered forms in French. A couple of my youngest participants – those who personally know and interact with non-binary people the

most – mentioned situations where they knew people who used multiple gendered forms, and were okay with people using alternating binary forms (with adjectives, for instance) or to use some combination of non-binary gender and binary gender (on one preferred end). P7 shared that essentially all the non-binary people she knows use multiple pronouns, so when you know them and you know if they have a leaning in one way, you can sort of adjust accordingly (e.g., using a non-binary neopronoun plus a masculine adjective for someone who uses the equivalent of *he* and *they* pronouns):

Et surtout, moi, mes amis, uh, utilisent, fin, les seules personnes avec qui j'ai des interactions orales qui sont non-binaires utilisent toujours un autre pronom. C'est jamais un-- uniquement iel, et donc les adjectifs, les accords ... ou oui sinon ils utilisent tous. C'est-à-dire que, ils peuvent parler d'eux mêmes en se référant au féminin, se référant au masculin. (P7)

And especially, personally, my friends, uh, use, well, the only people I verbally interact with who are non-binary always use another pronoun. It's never only *iel*, and so the adjectives, the agreements ... or yeah if not, they use all [forms]. In other words, they can speak about themselves by referring to themselves in the feminine, [and] referring to themselves in the masculine.

This comment reinforces previous findings that some non-binary French speakers do in fact prefer to self-describe through alternating gendered forms (Knisley 2020, Kaplan 2022). This also mirrors gendered form alternating strategies Bershtling (2014) observed in genderqueer speakers of Hebrew. P5 also mentioned having been told he can alternate forms for some people, using masculine and feminine forms as frequently as each other, indicating that it's a convenient strategy to be able to use:

Donc euh, voilà. Si on me dit que c'est-- que je peux autant genrer au féminin qu'au masculin, ben c'est qu'il y a-- ça c'est parfait. [laugh] (P5)

So uh, yeah. If someone tells me that it's– that I can gender in the feminine as much as in the masculine, well that there's– that's perfect [laugh]

Due to the nature of my study and the fact that I wanted to see what participants would do when tasked with not relying on binarily gendered forms for the NB images, I did not see a lot of instances of this kind of description being used in an intentional way. It is true that I saw P3 and

P4 struggle to land on an acceptable word for the NB images and end up alternating forms in one utterance, such as in (60):

(60) **elle est heureuse-- ou il est, il est heureux ou heureuse !**
 ‘she is happy^F– or he is, he is happy^M or happy^F!’

(excerpt of P3 re: Image G)

Note that this is not exactly the same as what P5 and P7 were describing to me in the above quotes, which would entail alternating binary forms throughout longer stretches of time (i.e., choosing to use the masculine adjective form in one sentence, and then using a feminine form in another sentence at another time). Still, even if it is not a perfect or streamlined response, it is promising to see that in (60), P3 was able to grasp that she should not exclusively use one binary form to describe a non-binary figure, and although she did not have a clear idea what would be best, she did make the choice to alternate gendered forms.

All things considered, I was only capable of observing so much within the constraints of my study, and my discussions with P5 and P7 both emphasized that 1) the linguistic strategies one uses to describe a non-binary person in a real-life circumstance should always be informed by the preferences of said non-binary individual themselves, and 2) said linguistic choices can very well include binarily gendered forms and often do in a language like French.

6. Conclusion

In devising this study, I set out to interview everyday L1 French speakers and see how they responded to the task of describing a non-binary referent in the binarily gendered language. With the knowledge that these speakers were not directly involved in the heart of non-binary francophone communities, I hoped to get a sense of what linguistic strategies are most commonly recognized and used in the larger French speaking population in France beyond the innovations of genderqueer L1 speakers and educators themselves that have been previously studied (Kaplan 2022, Knisley 2020, Knisley 2022), and to see if there was any overlap and wider understanding of these proposed strategies.

All things considered, the strategies that I saw most frequently in practice were not fully aligned with the more extensive list of strategies that educators and the larger online community have proposed, pointing to a disconnect between the most novel innovations of NB French and

the general French-speaking population. I observed a relatively low occurrence of neologisms in my responses, for example, and these were limited to a handful of uses of the non-binary neopronoun *iel*. That being said, language change takes time, and at the very least this study does suggest that France is seeing some amount of progress towards a more widespread understanding of ways we can respectfully employ non-binary language in French speech. Younger participants and participants more involved in the educational sphere were most inclined to fully mark NB gender, so we can infer that these are spheres in which sociolinguistic advancements are being made at least to some extent (e.g., through the more widespread use of neopronouns, and a clearer understanding of varied gender identity).

Of course, I observed some cases where descriptions fell short of conveying non-binary gender for the non-binary images. Unfortunately, it remains true even today that many people in the world will simply not understand or respect a non-binary person's wishes of how they want to be gendered. Largely, though, the people I spoke with did show a genuine desire to be able to refer to non-binary people without misgendering them, and some were simply not fully confident in their ability to do that. Many of my participants were unaware of certain linguistic possibilities that might be seen as non-standard in their language, but this just tells us that we should keep learning about this subject and educating people so that the francophone world can be better prepared to face the task of spoken non-binary French head-on in the future. In the meantime, clearly there are some strategies, such as impersonal and verb-based constructions, that allow people to approach the issue of respecting non-binarity with the linguistic tools they already have available to them. As previous literature studying genderqueer speakers such as the works of Bershtling (2014), Papadopolous (2019), Kaplan (2022), Knisley (2020, 2022), and so many more have emphasized, there are always ways to innovate within a language context that might be perceived as constrictive, and people do find ways to adapt and subvert linguistic gender binaries. What this study has added to that conversation is that speakers who have comparatively less experience with the task of marking non-binary gender are also capable of finding ways to make it work in speech.

6.1 Notes for future study

By and large, the use of stick figures as the base of this study allowed for a level of flexibility and neutrality in creating image varieties that I appreciated. That being said, my image

responses occasionally contained their own social complexities. The primary way this came up was that participants ascribed a lot of gender-related assumptions to some of the images and their gender markings, which is not shocking in a study related to gender. This included several participants reacting to the NB stick figure with question marks above their head and describing that person as ‘questioning themselves’ or ‘unsure about their identity’. This also included several comments about certain stick figure traits as seeming more so associated with one gender marking, such as the muscular stick figure being far more widely perceived as a man or masculine, even when the image was marked as being feminine or non-binary. These kinds of reactions may have skewed participants to use more of a certain type of linguistic strategy in their responses to certain images, but largely it seemed like added projection and stereotyping of the figures was only a significant issue with a small number of my images.

The other major factor of note is the structure of my interviews, which I worry may have prompted people to use repeated types of constructions due to seeing variations of the same image back to back. I would be interested to see if participants would employ more varied linguistic strategies if the order and structure of their elicitation exercise was different from my own. The fact that I also ended up having to do one of my interviews with two people at one time (P3 and P4) was also challenging as far as how I handled my data, and I decided to count their responses with the knowledge and mention that they were highly susceptible to influencing one another’s linguistic choices throughout the study.

Lastly, due to the nature of observing natural speech data, there is some degree of uncertainty as to which linguistic choices and occurrences were the result of speech errors or disfluencies. In future research using this kind of data, it could be insightful to pay closer attention to the frequency of pauses and disfluencies in responses and how that varies between binarily gendered and non-binary descriptions.

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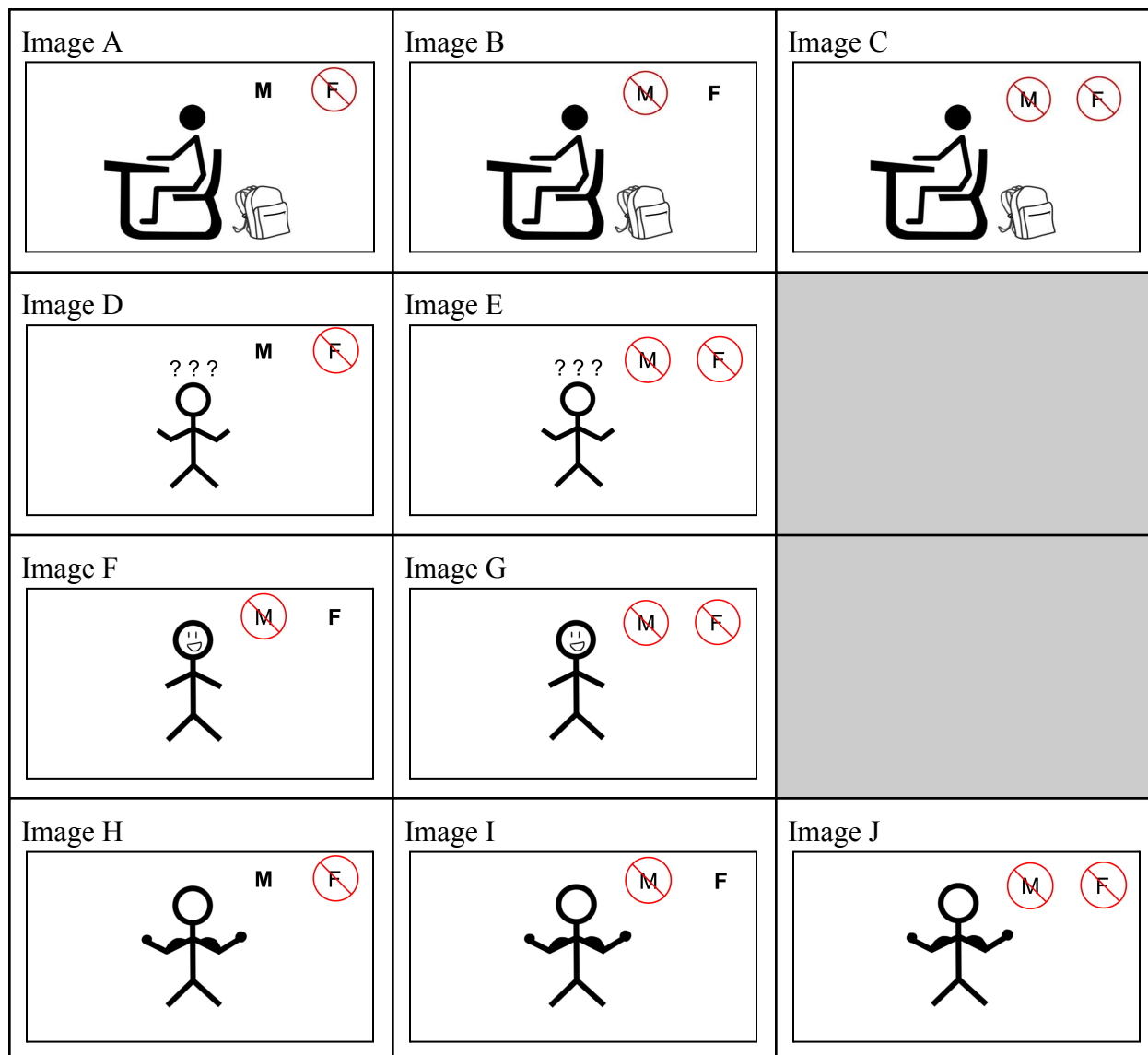
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8. Appendix

8.1 Study Images



8.2 Complete Image Responses

Image A: masc, student

- (1) D'accord, donc c'est un étudiant, si je comprends bien. Un élève, qui est une forme neutre, mais qui est ... pour les personnes du primaire et du secondaire.
- (2) Ben, je dirais que c'est un homme, un homme ou un enfant, un garçon peut-être ... qui est sur un ... un bureau d'écolier, il y a son cartable, et qui travaille.

- (3) C'est une personne qui est assise ... on dirait qu'il tape. Et ... derrière il a un sac à dos. [implied il] travaille.
- (4) Ouais, c'est une personne qui travaille sur son ... sur son ordinateur, euh, au bureau. Peut-être un écolier aussi, avec un cartable.
- (5) Alors. Là, on peut voir une personne qui est assise à un bureau. Vu qu'il y a un sac derrière elle, on pourrait croire qu'elle est en classe, elle est en train d'assister à un cours. Et uh, en regardant, uh, les symboles juste dessus, le féminin est barré, donc c'est une personne de genre masculin.
- (6) Cette personne, uh de sexe masculin, est assise à une table. C'est sans doute à l'école puisqu'il y a un sac à dos.
- (7) Ben, il est assis-- cette personne, il est assis, uh, sur une table, avec un sac à dos, donc possiblement c'est un étudiant, uh, un élève.

Image B: fem, student

- (1) Une étudiante, ou une élève, s'il s'agit d'une personne du primaire ou du secondaire encore une fois.
- (2) Donc là, ben, c'est une élève, hein ? Pareil, ou une étudiante, uh, une jeune fille, ou une petite fille. Uh ... avec son cartable, qui est dans les mêmes conditions, qui travaille. Voilà. Mhm.
- (3) C'est la même sauf que là c'est femme, c'est ça ? [...] Mais là c'est exactement -- comme tu dis, ça peut être un écolier, euh, voilà.
- (4) Voilà, c'est -- moi j'ai la même [sauf] que peut-être là c'est femme et là c'est homme
- (5) Ben là inversement, toujours dans une classe assis à un bureau, sauf que là c'est le 'M' qui est barré, donc c'est une personne qui se genre au féminin.
- (6) Uh, cette personne de sexe féminin est assis [sic] à une table. Et uh, [no subject pronoun] a aussi un sac à dos.
- (7) Uh ... dans le même cas, je dirais que c'est une étudiante, euh ... ouais, une élève.

Image C: NB, student

- (1) Et, ben, c'est une personne qui va à l'université, ou qui va au, à l'école primaire ou au collège ou au lycée, à priori ... fin je -- voilà. Le pupitre, le sac, c'est ma pensée. Puis je suis une personne de formation professionnelle, je vois des étudiants et des étudiantes partout.
- (2) Et bien là, je dirais que c'est une personne, puisque je peux pas la genrer, ... uh, dans les mêmes conditions, qui travaille, uh, qui a posé son cartable à côté de son bureau, son sac.
- (3) Et on le-- on l'a déjà dit, non ? Que c'est une personne qui est devant un, un ordinateur ou, comme le dit [name of other participant], un écolier puisqu'il y a un sac à dos uh, derrière.

- (4) Ouais, c'est exactement ça. ... Un garçon, un homme, une femme, peut-être, qui est assis, et ... qui travaille, euh, dans son ... son ordinateur, avec son cartable posé au sol et ... voilà.
- (5) Et ... ben là je dirais que c'est aussi une personne assise à un bureau. Donc voilà, j'utilise bien le mot "personne" pour pas qualifier son genre, qui est, uh, ben apparemment le non-binaire. Et voilà.
- (6) Cette personne de ... de s- ... genre non-binaire est assise à une table, et [no subject pronoun] a aussi un sac à dos dans le coin.
- (7) Et là, uhh, de manière assez naturelle j'utiliserais "iel," et je dirais que, c'est un ... un ou une étudiant.e [pronounced "étudiante"], uh et pour, à l'oral, j'aurais le tendance d'utiliser "élève" plus que "étudiant" puisque y'a moins le cas, euh ... y'a pas, y'a moins le "e" féminin rajouté qui est trop ... trop important à l'oral

Image D: masc, confused

- (1) Alors, c'est uh... une personne, qui se pose des que-- c'est un garçon, peut-être, qui se pose des questions.
- (2) Alors, cette personne ... ben. C'est un monsieur, il s'interroge. [...] Oui, oui. Il met les mains comme si, voilà, ou il s'étonne, mais comme il y a les points d'interrogation, je pense qu'il y a aussi la formulation des questions, et qu'il s'interroge.
- (3) Il sait pas [...] il se cherche, il se cherche.
- (4) Il se pose des questions. [...] Je pense que moi, je-- c'est un homme qui marche dans la rue, qui se retrouve entre deux chemins, il sait pas auquel ... [laughs] [...] Il sait pas s'il peut promener ... [unintelligible]
- (5) Là, ça c'est une personne qui se pose des questions, elle a une petite point d'interrogation en dessus d'elle. Mais euh ... là le masculin n'est pas barré, le 'M' de masculin n'est pas barré, mais peut-être que c'est une personne qui, uh, qui se pose des questions sur son genre, vu le sujet de l'étude.
- (6) Il s'interroge sur qu'il est ?
- (7) Uh, c'est un bébé-- c'est un ... personne qui se pose des questions, qui s'interroge, mais c'est un homme ? Ouais ?

Image E: NB, confused

- (1) Une personne qui se pose, peut-être les mêmes questions, d'autres questions ... Qui a pas l'air de comprendre
- (2) Eh ... ben là c'est pareil, c'est une personne, uh, qui s'interroge aussi.
- (3) Voilà c'est ... ouais ben c'est ... ben il se cherche, il se-- elle-- cette personne sait pas .. si elle est femme ou si elle est homme, si, voilà, [on?] sait pas. [elle?] se pose des questions.
- (4) C'est une personne ... voilà, on ne sait pas. ... [?] se pose la question.
- (5) Alors, là c'est une personne qui se pose aussi des questions. Euh ... elle est peut-être non-binaire, ou intersexe, mm ... honnêtement, je saurais pas trop dire. Uh ... les-- vu que

le 'M' et le 'F' sont barrés, oui, elle est non-binaire, mais elle se pose beaucoup de questions.

- (6) Uh, iel s'interroge sur son identité ?
- (7) Uh, iel s'interroge, euh ... est perdu.e

Image F: fem, happy

- (1) Là, ça c'est donc une jeune fille ou une femme qui a l'air heureuse.
- (2) Là il y a une visage, bon. C'est quelqu'un qui sourit, qui ne s'étonne pas, puisqu'elle a pas les bras relevés. Uh, elle a des yeux, une bouche, elle a l'air un peu de sourire, voilà.
- (3) Il est content, joyeux. Fin-- la personne est ... Ouais, ouais, il sait ce qu'il veut. Ben, il sait, uh, il a choisi le ... Ben il est heureux [begins by using masculine gendered pronouns and such, then once prompted to note the feminine gender:] Oui. Fin moi, je le vois-- fin, j'sais pas si femme ou homme, moi, mais, moi je le vois et [bon?] en tout cas. La personne est heureuse.
- (4) Il a choisi son camp(?). Il sait ce qu'il veut ... Il sait quel genre il est, peut-être [begins by using masculine gendered pronouns and such, then once prompted to note the feminine gender:] Je dirais uh ... c'est une femme et puis, c'est une femme [laugh]
- (5) Alors, là c'est une personne qui se sent, euh, à l'aise dans son corps, avec qui elle est. Et qui se genre au féminin. [...] Voilà, qui se considère comme une femme.
- (6) Uh, elle est vraiment très heureuse.
- (7) C'est, uh, elle est contente.

Image G: NB, happy

- (1) Et... là, c'est une personne qui a l'air heureuse aussi.
- (2) Et ben, une personne aussi, euh ... même chose, pas d'interrogation, qui sourit. ... Une personne non-genrée, comme l'indiquent les, uh, les petits panneaux.
- (3) Ben là, pareil, il semble ... qu'il se sent homme ou femme, ben ... Il a fait le bon choix. Fin-- elle est heureuse-- ou il est, il est heureux ou heureuse !
- (4) Ben je vois homme, à tout à l'heure c'était femme, apparemment, c'est ... heureux.
- (5) Et là, c'est une personne qui est très contente dans son corps, qui est à l'aise avec elle-même, et uh, qui est non-binaire, et qui est content de l'être, qui a su se trouver. [chuckle] Voilà.
- (6) Um, c'est une personne très heureuse.
- (7) Iel est content.

Image H: masc, strong

- (1) Ah, là c'est, c'est clairement un garçon, un jeune homme ou un monsieur qui aime, qui est très fier de ses muscles, ou sa virilité ... cette masculinité, mhm.
- (2) Bon, ben là on me dit que c'est un homme, hein ? Effectivement, qui montre, uh, en français on dit un peu familièrement "ses biscotos," ses muscles, c'est, uh, voilà. Euhh ...

Et puis il y a peut-être aussi l'idée que ... il serre les poings comme pour dire qu'il a gagné.

- (3) Oh, il a des muscles ! [laugh] ... Um, um, moi je dirais un homme là. Non ? Parce qu'il est musclé, non ? Avec des bras, non ? ... Il est sportif. On va dire. Voilà. La personne est sportive. Popeye [laugh]
- (4) C'est pareil, c'est peut-être un homme, c'est peut-être une femme ... Masculin, là, c'est ... Après, y'a des femmes qui sont musclées aussi ... qui forment (?) ... mais c'est vrai que ... Popeye, Popeye.
- (5) Oh, la. Ben, là c'est une personne qui a l'air d'être forte, elle a des gros biceps. Et um, vu que le 'M' n'est pas barré, je l'ai-- je pense que c'est une personne qui, uh, se considère comme un homme, qui se genre au masculin.
- (6) C'est un homme très fort.
- (7) Il est fort.

Image I: fem, strong

- (1) Et là, c'est une femme, une jeune femme, ou une jeune fille qui est aussi très fière de ses, uh, de ses muscles.
- (2) Là c'est une femme, ben, c'est la même chose sauf que c'est beaucoup plus rare [laugh] [...] Eh, oui ! Parce que ... fin oui, je, je pense que c'est ... c'est moins une attitude féminine, mais effectivement c'est une femme qui a gagné, qui, qui montre ses muscles.
- (3) Ben, comme a dit .. [name] il a dit que ce soit homme ou femme, voilà. Voilà. Ils sont sportifs, voilà. [referring to previous figures as well]
- (4) Ben, ça se trouve que, y'a des femmes aussi qui sont très musclées, euh, qui font du ...
- (5) Inversement, c'est une personne musclée aussi, qui se genre au féminin.
- (6) C'est une femme très forte.
- (7) Uh, elle est forte.

Image J: NB, strong

- (1) Une personne qui est aussi, uh, [laugh] ... très forte.
- (2) Et bien, c'est pareil, c'est une personne -- alors là je peux pas faire des commentaires -- mais euh, qui semble avoir gagné quelque chose, ouais, et qui, qui a fait preuve de force pour euh, pour remporter, uh, peut-être une espèce de victoire, oui. Voilà.
- (3) [no actual description, generalizing about women]
- (4) Je pense que la majorité des gens-- moi, je parle pour moi, mais ça... on trouve ça un homme. [goes on to talk more abstractly about sexism too]
- (5) Ben là c'est aussi une personne très musclée. Et qui se sent ni homme ni femme, qui se sent non-binaire.
- (6) C'est une personne très forte.
- (7) Uh, iel est musclé.e, iel est fort, uh, ouais.