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**Un-boxing gender: Toward trans-affirming L2 pedagogies**

**Abstract**: Language education represents a site for identity (re)construction, mediated through language acquisition and use (Atkinson, 2011). Through acts such as speaking, reading, and writing, learners must linguistically position themselves and be positioned by others. In this way, language education encourages learners' reflections on their own identities in relation to the broader social world (Dornyei, 2014; Norton, 2013). Although language learning allows students to explore new linguistic and cultural identities, there is often limited attention to gender and sexual diversity in the curriculum, textbooks, research, and pedagogy of language classrooms (Nelson, 2009), leaving many educators to report feeling particularly un- or under-prepared to engage in gender-just language teaching. In following, this webinar will discuss the broad ways that we, as teachers, can queer our L2 classrooms, materials, and pedagogical approaches to serve all of our students. Practically-focused, the content of this webinar will draw on Kris Knisely's research into the ways that non-binary speakers of French are presently challenging, subverting, and adapting a grammatically binary linguistic system. In turn, this example will allow us to collectively consider the unique pedagogical opportunities that the identification and teaching of non-binary language forms affords. This pedagogical discussion addresses questions of curricular scope and sequence and argues for the theorized value for all students of teaching these non-standard forms in terms of increasing classroom inclusiveness, fostering tolerance of ambiguity, and the development of linguistic and intercultural competencies.

**Term Definitions**

*Cisnormativity*: The erroneous assumption that (almost) all people are cisgender, presenting such identification with the sex one was forcibly assigned at birth as the only valued, valid, or possible gender modality

*Cisgender*: A descriptor for individuals who identify with the gender (or sex) assigned to them at birth.

*(Gender) Binary*: A system that assumes two, distinct gender categories, which are assumed to align with binary categories of physical sex: male and female.

*Gendered language attitudes:* See language attitudes. Stereotypes and perceptions of language related to gender. The connections individuals make between the non-linguistic traits of masculinity or femininity and individual linguistic features or entire language varieties

*Genderqueer:* A term used by *some*, but not all individuals who identify as gender non-binary, which has queer politics and queer theory of the 1990s as its origin. May connote a central affiliation with the broader queer community and a politics of subversion (See Non-binary). There are generational trends in its use or lack of use in the US. (Similar to *être queer dans son genre* in French.)

*Grammatical Gender:* The classification of objects into grammatical categories, masculine or feminine in French, including the ways in which agreement is reflected in noun-dependent parts of speech.

*Heteronormativity:* The presentation of cisgender, White, monogamous, reproductive, able-bodied, straightness as natural, normal, and desirable.

*Inclusive language*: Linguistic forms that are not gender-specific, but which do not necessarily refer specifically to non-binary individuals.

*Intercultural competence:* The ability and desire to communicate (or negotiate symbolic meaning) effectively, appropriately, and ethically with diverse individuals and groups whose cultures are other

than one's own. This deep engagement is based on one's critical knowledge, skills and attitudes (both of themselves and of others), wherein culture is dynamic, heterogeneous, and multi-layered.

*Language attitudes:* Culturally-bound and individualized stereotypes and perceptions of language, which may be applied to social groups, to individual linguistic features, or to entire language varieties. These positive or negative attitudes are typically drawn from stereotypes and perceptions of real or imagined speakers and the connections that all individuals readily make between linguistic traits and non-linguistic traits such as politeness and trustworthiness (cf Tamasi & Antieau, 2014).

*Non-binary/ Non-binaire*: A term used to describe individuals who neither identify as exclusively male nor exclusively female. The English term was introduced in the 21st century to call for the respect and for the dignity of trans people who do not identify as solely woman or man, as opposed to a politics of subversion (See Genderqueer) and may connote a primary affiliation with the trans community. May be considered an umbrella term under which genderqueer may be included, depending on the individual (*Non-binaire* is the French term for non-binary and is the most frequently used identity term of its type.)

*Non-binary language*: Linguistic forms that are gender neutral and which are specifically used to refer to non-binary individuals (also called *gender neutral linguistic forms*).

*Symbolic competence:* The ability to position oneself as a multilingual subject and to manipulate the three dimensions of language as a symbolic system: symbolic representation, symbolic action, symbolic power. This implies the ability to understand the cultural memories evoked by symbolic systems, to perform and create alternative realities, and to reframe and shape the multilingual game in which one invests (Kramsch, 2011; Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008).

*TGNC:* TGNC is used in the context of this talk to refer to the collectivity of individuals who are trans, non-binary, and/or gender non-conforming. It is a broad, umbrella abbreviation used, here, in an effort to subvert any possibility of transnormative exclusion.

*Trans/Transgender*: An umbrella term to identify individuals who do <u>not</u> identify with the gender identity (or sex) assigned to them at birth.

*Transnormativity*: The presentation of only certain trans embodiments as valid (i.e. The assumption that trans people should fit a cissexist idea of what is "normal").

## Queer Inquiry-Based Pedagogies (QIBPs)

### What we know[i]
- "Learning how to talk critically and fluently about sex and sexuality [sic and gender diversity] composes a significant part of becoming literate in our society. Being able to address sexuality issues intelligently, critically, and comfortably is vital if we are to participate in some of the most important debates of our time," (Alexander, 2008, p.2)
- LGBTQ+ issues make up a non-trivial part of our students' lives (Moore, 2016; Nelson, 2009; Nguyen & Yang, 2015).
- L2 Instructors feel under-prepared to handle LGBTQ+-themed discussion (MacDonald, El Metoui, Baynham, & Gray, 2014; Saunston, 2018)
- Teacher education programs largely ignore LGBTQ+ considerations (Paiz, 2018)
- Mainstream SLA materials are predominantly heteronormative (Grey, 2013; Paiz, 2015) and cis-normative (Knisely, forthcoming).

### Guiding Principles
- Restive problematizing of all identities and discourses (Nelson, 2009; Pennycook, 2001)
- Exposing & interrogating normativity in all its forms (Nelson, 2006)
- Creating space for marginalized voices and Identities (Vandrick, 2001)
- Fostering respectful engagement with disparate worldviews [i.e. intercultural competence] (Merse, 2017; Paiz, 2020).

### Pedagogical aims
- Raise awareness of LGBTQ+ lives and concerns (Krause, 2017; Paiz, 2019)
- Introduce the linguistically situated ways that we index and perform identities (Nguyen & Huang, 2015; Paiz, 2020; Knisely, forthcoming 2020)
- Foster critical thinking (Merse, 2017; Nelson, 2009)
- Equip students with the linguistic and rhetorical skills needed to advocate for self and others [i.e. symbolic competence] (Kramsch; Moore, 2016; Nelson, 2009; Paiz, 2020)

### Strategies for Queering L2 Teaching and Learning
- Exploring with your students
  - Individualize learning;
  - Decenter the classroom;
  - Queer students' perception of expertise;
  - Uncover locally relevant, real-world LGBTQ+ experiences and language.
- Find space throughout the curriculum
  - Avoid "Gay Day" / "Trans Day" special topics
  - Create value around LGBTQ+ discussions as a part of critical literacy and acculturation
  - Underscore how LGBTQ+ issues are performed and parsed through different linguistic and rhetorical functions
- Critical close reading & discussion
  - Is where the "rubber meets the road"
  - Makes explicit how language and our assumptions work together to create our perception of reality
  - Draws attention to how normative discourses silence certain lives
- Tie LGBTQ content to language learning goals
  - Shows that sexuality & gender are important parts of acquiring an L2 and a sense of self in it
  - Contributes to de-sensationalizing LGBTQ+ content and discussions
  - Aids in gaining student & administrative buy in
- Focus on respectful engagement
  - Shows that sexuality & gender are important parts of acquiring an L2 and a sense of self in it
  - Contributes to desensationalizing LGBTQ+ content and discussions
  - Aids in gaining student & administrative buy in
- Remember that queer pedagogy requires that _all_ engage in self-reflective practice
  - Respect that we are all at different starting points in our engagement with LGBTQ+ issues
  - Take time to critically reflect on your queer pedagogy
  - It is not only up to community insiders to build LGBTQ+-inclusive classroom spaces in the SLA/L2 context

### Guiding Questions for Self-Reflection:[ii]
1. What do I know about LGBTQ+/TGNC individuals and communities in the sociocultural environment in which I teach? In my L2 contexts?
2. How can I construct teaching and learning moments that build upon what I *do* know and that lean into meaningful joint inquiry with students for what I do *not* yet know?
3. What dominant discourses come up in or underlie my course material? How can we collaboratively work towards a core philosophy of problematizing dominant discourses?
4. (How) Do I represent gender and sexual diversity? Do my representations of TGNC-ness/queerness reproduce or challenge dominant discourses? Are they judgement-free representations that carefully distinguish between non-normative and abnormal?
5. (How) Do I model respectful engagement?
6. What course policies, procedures, and expectations do I have that could be modified to be more inclusive of LGBTQ+/TGNC people? And the materials I use?

**Non-binary and Inclusive French[iii]**

Subject Pronouns:

| je | nous |
|----|------|
| tu | vous |
| [v]il/elle/iel | ils/elles/iels |

Direct Object Pronouns:

| me | nous |
|----|------|
| te | vous |
| le/la/læ | les |

Disjunctive Pronouns[iv]:

| moi | nous |
|-----|------|
| toi | vous |
| lui/elle/soi/ellui | eux/elles/elleux |

Demonstrative Pronouns[vi]:

| celui/celle/cellui | ceux/celles/celleux |
|----|----|

Possessive Determiners[vii]:

| mon | ma | maon | mes |
|-----|-----|------|-----|
| ton | ta | taon | tes |
| son | sa | saon | Ses |
| notre | notre | notre | Nos |
| votre | votre | votre | vos |
| leur | leur | leur | leurs |

Articles:

| Definite[viii] | Indefinite[ix] |
|----------|------------|
| le/la/læ/l' | un/une/un.e |
| les | des |

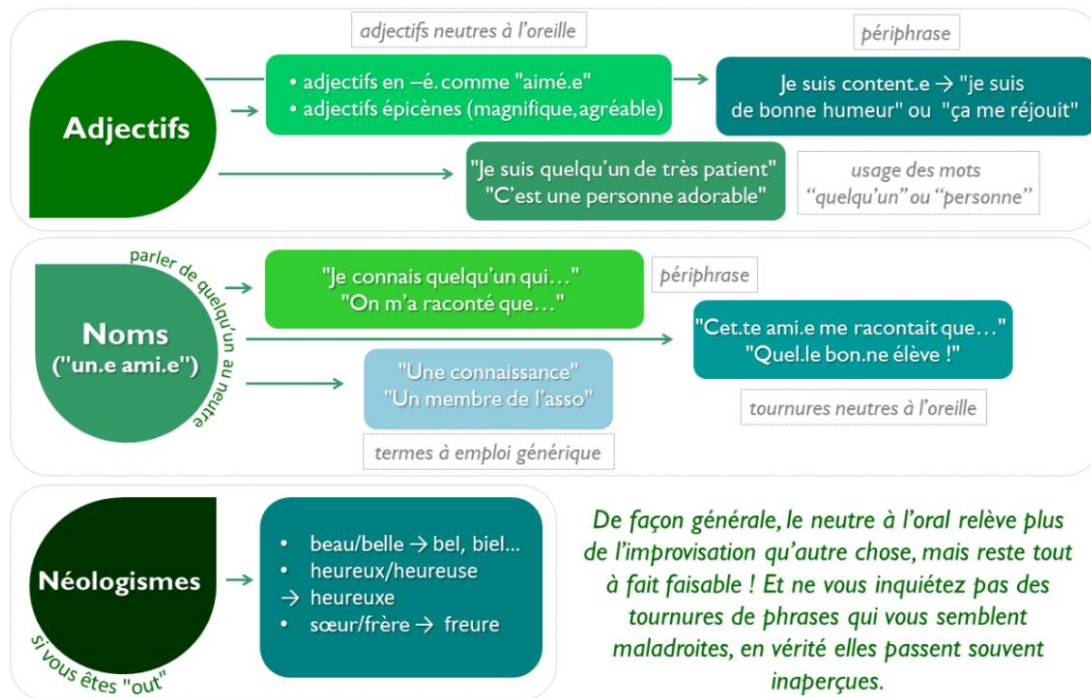*Gender Accord:*

Written communication:

Use punctuated affixes that combine conventionally masculine and feminine forms.

Examples:   Iel est allé.e. / Iel est allé-e. / Iel est allé·e.          (*They went.*)
Iel est amoreux.se. / Iel est amoreux-se. / Iel est amoreux·se.   (*They are in love.*)

Oral Communication :



De façon générale, le neutre à l'oral relève plus de l'improvisation qu'autre chose, mais reste tout à fait faisable ! Et ne vous inquiétez pas des tournures de phrases qui vous semblent maladroites, en vérité elles passent souvent inaperçues. [x]

*Electronic version available at*: https://bit.ly/2FasRQE

**Sample Syllabus Language:**

**Classroom Behavior Policy:** To foster a positive learning environment, students and instructors have a shared responsibility. We want a safe, welcoming, and inclusive environment where all of us feel comfortable with each other and where we can challenge ourselves to succeed. Remember to be considerate to your classmates and instructors: address them politely using their personal pronouns (mine are *il* or *iel*), […]. If you are unsure how to refer to someone, please ask them (e.g. *Quels pronoms utilisez-vous?*). For those of us who use non-binary pronouns (e.g. the singular *they*, *ze/zim/zir*, etc.) in English, there may be some linguistic hurdles to overcome in order to use affirming language. French has traditionally had binary <u>grammatical</u> gender (e.g. masculine and feminine forms) but there are solutions available to us that are being created by non-binary Francophone communities for talking about non-binary <u>social</u> gender. Although these forms have not always yet made it into mainstream media, including our textbook, they are a part of a valuable linguistic co-culture and they will be seen and used throughout the semester in supplementary materials and in class. We will work together on being able to both use these forms to show respect and on being able to explain where they are and are not traditionally used so as to be able to advocate for ourselves and others. If at any time you make a mistake, simply say *pardon* and correct yourself. With time and practice you will improve on using these forms in interculturally competent ways. If at any time you have questions or concerns, please reach out to your instructor.

**Display name**. Please make sure your first and last name are listed in your Zoom name display. Use the name you go by (i.e. How you would like us in this class to refer to you), whether or not it matches the legal name I might have been given by the university. Feel free to add your pronouns as well (i.e. il, elle, iel, øl, etc.), if you'd like to/feel comfortable doing so. Feel free to reach out to me over email if you have any concerns or if you'd like support in navigating how to best represent yourself in French.

**Sample Note to Students:**

Dear students,

Today we discussed how nouns in French are classified into two possible categories, which is traditionally referred to as grammatical gender. You may have thought to yourself "Why is a marker, a desk, or a notebook masculine while a pencil eraser, a window, or a table feminine?" Your intuition is spot on! Grammatical gender can align with social gender, such as when we talk about *un homme* or *une femme*, but social gender and grammatical gender are **<u>not</u>** always going to overlap. Most of the time, this classification will feel arbitrary.

You may have also noticed that there are only two categories for grammatical gender in French – masculine and feminine – unlike some other languages like Ngan'gityemerri, which has 15+ genders or Zulu, which has 16 noun classes. You may also have thought about the fact that there are people who identify as neither exclusively male nor exclusively female, for whom we can use the umbrella term non-binary. In French, we use the term *non-binaire*. French can sometimes be tricky for expressing non-binary gender identities, but throughout the semester I will be presenting information about how non-binary identities can be expressed in French that your textbook doesn't cover. Though the singular they is more and more commonly used in English, this is still an area that is developing in French. As a part of being an inclusive classroom community, remember to ask your classmates what pronouns they use (Quel(s) pronom(s) utilisez-vous?).

As always, if you have any questions, please reach out to me. I'm always here and happy to help.

**Sample Twitter Web-Quest Activity:** [*English gloss*] (see also Knisely, Forthcoming 20201a)

French, as a language, presents some linguistic challenges to non-binary speakers (individuals who are neither exclusively male-identified nor exclusively female-identified) due to its traditional binary grammatical gender. However, we know that social gender and grammatical gender are distinct constructs – since experiences of gender can fall far outside of a traditional binary paradigm. Because the language forms used by non-binary speakers of French are neologistic (new, rapidly evolving, and not always known outside of queer communities), they tend not to find their way into traditional classroom materials. To attend to this missing information, you will, with a partner, complete a Twitter Web-Quest activity to observe the ways in which queer speakers are manipulating and subverting the French language in order to create the necessary conditions for congruent self-expression. First, do a hashtag search for the following terms: #nonbinaire #transgenre. Next, identify a few users who clearly note being non-binary or agender in their user profiles. Using this data, respond to the following questions:

1. What, if any, pronouns are being used by TGNC speakers? Are there patterns that you can observe (e.g. frequency, selection factors)? If so, what are these observable patterns?
2. How are trans and non-binary speakers subverting traditional agreement structures (binary grammatical gender marking of verbs, adjectives, etc.)? Are there patterns that you can observe (e.g. frequency, selection factors)? If so, what are these observable patterns?
3. Can you notice other strategies to avoid misgendering? (Be mindful of individual words, sentence structure, and larger discourse-level patterns.)

> 4.    Are connections between language and culture(s) apparent in any of the tweets you read? If so, how?
> Please submit your answers to the above questions (in French) to our D2L Assignments folder before our next session. We will be using everyone's anonymized responses as we discuss how language norms benefit some speakers and marginalize others.  In the class sessions that follow, we will apply this same type of thinking to numerous types of linguistic variation across multiple Francophone contexts, returning to the broader guiding questions we have been using this semester to think about and deconstruct myriad normativities: why is it so?; who benefits?; who is marginalized?; what alternatives exist?

## Resources:

*General:* [TSER](#), [GLAAD](#), *the* [Trevor Project](#), *and the 2020 documentary Disclosure.*

*French-Specific:* (see also Knisely, Forthcoming 20201a)

> *La binarité, c'est pas mon genre*. A TEDx talk by Antonin Le Mée https://goo.gl/XXKEmP
> Princ(ess)e LGBT's Youtube channel https://goo.gl/6ZJmCM
> Fondation Emergence https://www.fondationemergence.org/
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> Office québécois de la langue française (2017). « Transidentité », Le grand dictionnaire terminologique: http://www.gdt.oqlf.gouv.qc.ca/ficheOqlf.aspx ?Id_Fiche=8359852

*Spanish-Specific:* https://goo.gl/V6DRFz

*German-Specific:* https://goo.gl/LE2Fak0

*[xi]Other Language-Specific Information:* https://goo.gl/1nyE2a

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[i] Adapted/Expanded from Paiz, 2020.

[ii] Adapted from Knisely, forthcoming 2021b.

[iii] Only the forms with the highest frequency of use and highest overall comprehension ratings are included in this handout.

[iv] Also known as stressed pronouns. Used to indicate emphasis.

[v] All terms are listed in the following order: masculine/feminine/non-binary.

[vi] Correspond to the English forms this, that, these, and those.

[vii] The English glosses of these possessive determiners, from top to bottom, are my, your *informal*, his/her/their *singular*, our, your *plural or formal*, their. These agree in gender and number with what is possessed rather than the possessor.

[viii] The English definite article is the. *L'* is the contracted singular form before a vowel. *Les* is the plural French form.

[ix] The English indefinite article is a or an. *Des* is the plural indefinite article in French.

[x] Adapted from *Lavieenqueer*

[xi] The language-resources are *live* folders to which I will continue to add resources as I collect them.