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**Hekanaho, Laura**

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John Benjamins

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## A thematic analysis of attitudes towards English nonbinary pronouns

The article provides a comprehensive overview of attitudes towards nonbinary pronouns, with the aim of better understanding why these pronouns are either accepted or rejected. Attitudes towards nonbinary *they* and the neopronouns *ze* and *xe*, are explored with a thematic analysis of data derived from a larger online survey on pronouns (n=1128). While the results demonstrate various polarized stances for both types of pronouns, the participants' reactions highlight greater acceptance of and support for nonbinary *they*. In addition, the paper proposes that broader ideologies about gender are behind the participants' overt reactions to nonbinary pronouns. Most notably, while some participants rejected the pronouns on the basis of a binary gender ideology, others viewed gender as a matter of self-identification, accepting any pronoun an individual chooses for themselves.

**Keywords:** nonbinary, pronouns, attitudes, ideologies, thematic analysis

### 1. Introduction

This paper explores attitudes towards English nonbinary pronouns with qualitative data from a broader online survey (n=1128), further considering the role of ideologies, and connecting the topic to (non)sexist language use.<sup>1</sup> In this context, nonbinary pronouns are understood as a nonbinary person's chosen pronouns, other than *he* and *she*.<sup>2</sup> While

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a broader study, see Hekanaho (2020).

<sup>2</sup> 'Nonbinary' refers to individuals who are not female or male, including gender fluid, agender and bigender people (e.g., Matsuno & Budge, 2017). 'Nonbinary' is understood as a subgroup of 'transgender', which characterizes individuals whose gender does not (fully) match the gender assigned to them at birth.

nonbinary individuals may use binary pronouns, these pronouns are excluded from consideration as they are widely accepted and associated with binary identities. The definition further serves to distinguish nonbinary use from generic use, since attitudes seem to differ based on function (see Hekanaho, 2020). Nonbinary pronouns include the use of singular *they* when referring to a specific, nonbinary individual, as well as several neopronouns, such as *ze*, *xe*, *e*, and *ey*.

Nonbinary pronouns have emerged into mainstream discourse only relatively recently after several American universities adopted ‘pronoun preferences’ in the mid-2010’s (e.g., Chak, 2015; Scelfo, 2015).<sup>3</sup> New practices, such as sharing one’s pronouns (e.g., Zimman, 2019: 161–162), or coming out as transgender by claiming new pronouns (e.g., Darwin, 2017: 329–330), have further highlighted the importance of pronouns.

While nonbinary pronouns have quickly gained more acknowledgment, *they* seems to have been received more favorably. For example, singular *they* was lauded as word of the year in 2015 by the American Dialect Society, highlighting nonbinary use of the pronoun (Marquis, 2016); recently, ADS chose *they* as the word of the 2010’s (ADS, 2020). Nonbinary *they* has also been included in dictionaries (e.g., Merriam-Webster, 2019), and acknowledged in academic style guides (American Psychological Association, 2019). Nevertheless, there is considerable opposition towards nonbinary pronouns as well.

Nonbinary pronouns provide a fascinating avenue for studying ongoing changes in a grammatical class that does not easily allow changes. That pronouns are perceived as a

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<sup>3</sup> Neopronouns have been suggested even earlier to fill the perceived gap for a nongendered generic pronoun (Baron, 1981). However, this perceived problem is distinct from the current social motivation to adopt nonbinary pronouns to use in reference to known individuals.

‘closed class’ (e.g., Wales, 1996: 12–19) means that some speakers view changes in pronouns as a threat to linguistic integrity (see linguistic purism, Walsh, 2016). An additional challenge is that the adoption of nonbinary pronouns requires letting go of a binary gender ideology. Studying attitudes towards nonbinary pronouns helps in understanding which factors support rejection or acceptance of nonbinary pronouns, and how such factors may affect ongoing changes.

## **2. Language attitudes, ideologies and nonbinary pronouns**

The present study uses ‘attitudes’ as an umbrella term, broadly capturing *views, thoughts, feelings, ideas, beliefs, opinions*, etc. (see evaluative orientation in Garrett, 2010; and language regard in Preston, 2011). In contrast, ideologies are defined as naturalized sets of beliefs shared by a community (Milroy, L., 2004: 309). While ideologies are often so deeply naturalized that they are not easily recognized (Milroy, L., 2004: 318–319), particularly prevalent, powerful or controversial ones may become known by labels such as *feminism* or *socialism* (e.g., Van Dijk, 2006: 118). In this study, ideologies are conceptualized as fundamental, upper-level constructs governing attitudes (e.g., Van Dijk, 2006: 116–118). In this sense, attitudes are viewed as overt manifestations of ideologies (e.g., Milroy, L., 2004: 308; Sallabank, 2013: 64). However, overt expressions are not always “direct reflections of deeply held beliefs” (Rosa & Burdick, 2016: 107), as speakers may have various reasons, such as social desirability, for expressing attitudes that they do not truly embrace.

Attitudes towards nonbinary pronouns have not yet been studied extensively. Some previous studies have theorized and tracked changes in the use of singular *they* (e.g.,

Ackerman, 2017; Conrod, 2019; Konnelly & Cowper, 2020). Survey studies have mostly employed quantitative measurements and/or have only focused on singular *they* (Bradley, 2020; Conrod, 2019; Hernandez, 2020). These studies have explored predictors of acceptability, naturalness or grammaticalness (ibid.). For example, positive attitudes towards transgender people seem to support favorable views on *they* (Hekanaho, 2020; Hernandez, 2020), as does in-group membership (Conrod, 2019; Hekanaho, 2020). While previous studies (Bradley, 2020; Conrod, 2019; Hernandez, 2020) have included both generic and specific uses of *they*, it was not specified whether the referents were nonbinary people. Considering that language attitudes are linked to the group imagined to use such language (e.g., Garrett, 2010: 5), failing to identify pronoun use as specifically nonbinary may lead to more positive reception.

In contrast, English neopronouns have received less attention. Baron (1981) has studied generic neopronouns from a historical perspective, while a few MA theses have included nonbinary neopronouns in survey studies (Lund Eide, 2018; Parker, 2017). In both survey studies, nonbinary *they* was rated more acceptable than neopronouns (ibid.), as was the case in Hekanaho (2020) as well. Moreover, qualitative data has received limited attention in previous studies. In Conrod's study, some participants noted the use of "unusual" and "unnatural" pronouns, acknowledging that such uses are slowly becoming more acceptable, some even expressing support for nonbinary *they* (2019: 126–127). Such attitudinal stances are the focus of this paper.

A few more general studies on transgender identities have included discussion of pronouns, mostly from the perspective of in-group members (e.g., Corwin, 2017; Darwin, 2017; Zimman, 2017; Zimman, 2019). For example, in Darwin's study, the online

nonbinary community was aware of the hostility towards nonbinary pronouns (2017: 329–330). Darwin suggests this hostility may be due to the difficulty related to changing one’s language use (*ibid.*), a perspective also brought up in Hernandez’ study (2020: 59), and the present study (section 4). This difficulty may be due to the rarity of changes in the pronominal class, as well as the frequency and automaticity of their use (Zimman, 2019: 159–160). As such, the adoption of neopronouns may be more challenging than broadening the use of an already established pronoun, *they*. Nevertheless, as will be suggested in this paper, ideological reasons to reject nonbinary pronouns seem to carry more weight.

While qualitative attitude studies on nonbinary pronouns are still scarce, attitudes towards nonsexist language have been studied previously (Blaubergs, 1980; Parks & Robertson, 1998). These studies have identified many common types of arguments against nonsexist language, such as viewing “Language as a Trivial Concern” or experiencing attempts to change language as a form of “Unjustified Coercion”, a violation of “Freedom of Speech” (Parks & Robertson, 1998: 452–453). Similar arguments were identified in a study on the Swedish neopronoun, *hen*, which was recently adopted to compliment the gendered pronouns *han* “*he*” and *hon* “*she*” (Vergoossen et al., 2020).<sup>4</sup> For example, the participants argued that the pronoun issue is trivial, and that language need not be changed only because ‘a few people are hurt’ (*ibid.*). However, the study design did not clearly distinguish between generic and nonbinary use of *hen*, creating some uncertainty with the

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<sup>4</sup> While *hen* was introduced already in the 1960’s, it only gained wider acceptance when it was included in The Swedish Academy Glossary (SAOL) in 2015 (e.g., Gustafsson Sendén, Bäck & Lindqvist, 2015). *Hen* has received substantial academic interest; however the focus has mostly been on generic use, with only some commentary on the nonbinary context (e.g., Gustafsson Sendén, Bäck & Lindqvist, 2015; Vergoossen et al., 2020).

interpretation of the results. In section 5, I demonstrate how similar arguments as above are directed at English nonbinary pronouns.

### 3. Study design and methods

The data derives from a broader online survey (n=1128), conducted in 2017 (see Hekanaho, 2020). The sampling approach was quasi-purposive, as pre-defined demographic groups (e.g., based on gender, native language, political orientation) were targeted to fill loose quota (~100 participants per group). The survey was advertised on various online platforms (e.g., university e-mail lists, Twitter, Facebook), but most participants (84%) arrived from the discussion forum Reddit. The choice of subreddits (i.e., subforums) was based on target demographic groups.<sup>5</sup> While Reddit users represent various demographic groups, previous research suggests young, urban cis male individuals may be overrepresented (Duggan & Smith, 2013). This bias was also present in the collected sample (see below).

The participants' gender was elicited in freeform. However, the participants were asked to indicate if their gender was not the same as the gender they were assigned at birth. The rationale for distinguishing between cisgender and transgender participants is that the average transgender experience with pronouns likely differs from the average cisgender experience, since transgender people have often switched to using different

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<sup>5</sup> Participants were mostly recruited from subreddits for specific countries (e.g., r/Suomi), age groups (e.g., r/Over40), political groups (e.g., r/Feminism), religious groups (e.g., r/Christianity), and the LGTB (including r/lgbt and r/NonBinary). Unfortunately, some subreddits did not allow posting the invitation (e.g., r/conservative, r/Catholicism), leading to some bias in the sample.

pronouns than those assigned at birth (e.g., Zimman, 2017: 94). As such, transgender and cisgender people may have different views on pronouns.

About 54% of the participants were cis male (n=611), 36% cis female (n=411), and 9% transgender (n=101).<sup>6</sup> The majority of transgender participants were categorized as nonbinary (n= 79 or 7%). Most nonbinary participants (n=49) described their gender specifically as nonbinary, but some used descriptions such as *genderqueer*, *agender* and *bigender*. Binary transgender participants typically described their gender as *female* or *male*, specifying transgender background. Since the study concerned nonbinary pronouns, nonbinary participants were targeted during data collection; binary transgender individuals were also eligible, but not specifically targeted, explaining the low number of participants in this group. To allow for comparison to cisgender participants, binary and nonbinary transgender participants were merged as ‘transgender’. This decision was also supported by the data, as transgender participants had very similar views on pronouns.

Most participants (75%) were native speakers of English (n=842, mostly American, Australian, British and Canadian English speakers). About 15% of the participants were native Finnish speakers (n=183), 6% were native Swedish speakers (n=60), and the rest were bilingual (4% or n=43). Finnish and Swedish speakers were included to represent L2 speakers of English. These languages were chosen since Finnish has no gendered pronouns,<sup>7</sup> while Swedish has recently adopted the neopronoun *hen*. As such, speakers of these languages may have different views on pronouns. The choice was also affected by the author being familiar with both languages.

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<sup>6</sup> Gender information was missing for 5 participants.

<sup>7</sup> The nongendered standard pronoun is *hän*. In colloquial Finnish, the nongendered *se*, “it”, is also used for animate references, although in standard Finnish it is reserved for inanimate referents.

Overrepresented in the sample are younger generations (age range 18–80, mean=29), as well as university-educated (75%, n=839), liberal (80%, n=925), and feminist (60%, n=631) participants. These imbalances may be reflected in the relatively high acceptance of nonbinary pronouns (see section 4).

The data was elicited with optional, open-ended questions. The participants were asked to share their views on nonbinary *they* and the neopronouns, of which *ze* and *xe* were used as examples, deemed relatively frequent based on preliminary inquiries. Since the aim was to investigate *why* nonbinary pronouns are accepted or rejected, the participants were also asked to assess the acceptability of the pronouns with check boxes. Acceptability was loosely defined as language use that the participant themselves finds “correct” or “natural”. This definition turned out to be somewhat problematic, as for some participants “correct” and “natural” did not coincide, further considered in section 4.

Figure 1. Example of open-ended questions in the survey

6. What is your view on new pronouns such as *ze* and *xe* when they are used to refer to an individual who does not identify as female or male? For example: “Jo said *ze* doesn't like coffee” and “Terry was going out but *xe* could not find *xir* keys”.

Acceptable

Not acceptable

Comments (e.g., why do you view this usage as acceptable/ not acceptable)

The data was explored with corpus-assisted thematic analysis (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006). While the analysis was largely inductive, it was guided by the research question (*why* nonbinary pronouns are accepted or rejected). In addition, my own familiarity with the topic and with previous studies (Blaubergs, 1980; Parks & Robertson, 1998) shaped the interpretation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 80–83). The analysis process is described briefly below; for full description, see Hekanaho (2020).

Due to the large volume of data (~25000 words), corpus methods were employed to assist the thematic analysis (e.g., Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2014).<sup>8</sup> After an initial read-through of the dataset, key expressions were identified in word lists generated with AntConc (Anthony, 2018), along with collocation searches to ensure accurate interpretation. While frequency was considered as well, the process of identifying key expressions was largely intuitive, aligning with principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2016). Second, preliminary themes were formed based on identified key expressions. Third, the data was re-read and coded; additional themes were formed when needed. Importantly, one response could be coded for several different themes. The process was repeated several times, followed by check-up rounds. The employment of corpus methods, repeated rounds of coding, check-up rounds, and proper documentation helped ensure consistent coding throughout the dataset.

Last, the different themes were organized hierarchically, and a thematic field was created for each pronoun, comprising the most prevalent themes (see following section). The selection of themes in the final analysis was primarily based on meaningfulness and relevance, rather than mere frequency (see Braun & Clarke, 2006: 82–83). Nevertheless, frequent themes were typically also meaningful, thus included in the analysis.

#### **4. Attitudes towards nonbinary pronouns**

The thematic fields are first presented in section 4.1, followed by a more detailed discussion of the results, and the role of ideologies. Section 4.2 then explores which

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<sup>8</sup> The full data set in the broader study covers about 138 000 words (see Hekanaho, 2020).

arguments support the rejection or acceptance of nonbinary pronouns. Last, in section 4.3, some observations are made based on the participants' gender and native language.

#### 4.1 Results of the thematic analysis

The results are presented as hierarchical thematic fields, created with RAWGraphs by Mauri et al., 2017. Circle-packing charts provide an innovative approach for presenting results from a thematic analysis. They allow demonstrating both prevalence and hierarchy of different themes (cf. thematic maps). Figure 2 presents the results for nonbinary *they*, and Figure 3 for the neopronouns.

In the thematic fields, each of the three large circles represents one of three main themes, based on the type of argument the participant used: 1) Appeal to authority, 2) Appeal to social norms, and 3) Appeal to sense & logic.<sup>9</sup> Each main theme includes three mid-level themes, marked with different colors. These themes further capture more specific subthemes, represented by the smaller circles. The size of the circles is relative to the frequency of the subtheme for each pronoun, hence the figures only allow for a rough cross-comparison between pronouns.

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<sup>9</sup> Appeal to authority has been adopted from Parks and Robertson (1998).

Figure 2. Thematic field for nonbinary *they*, based on 467 responses

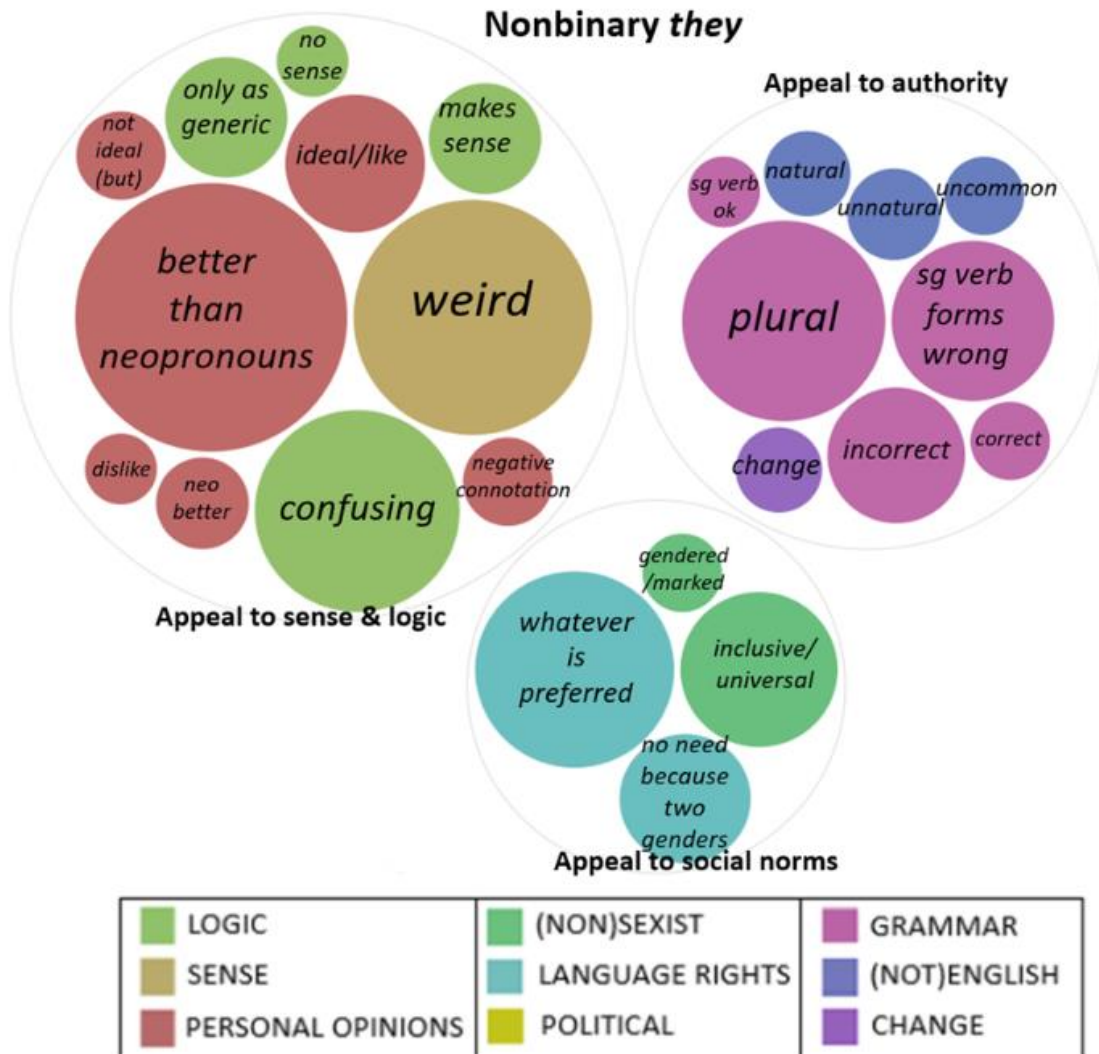
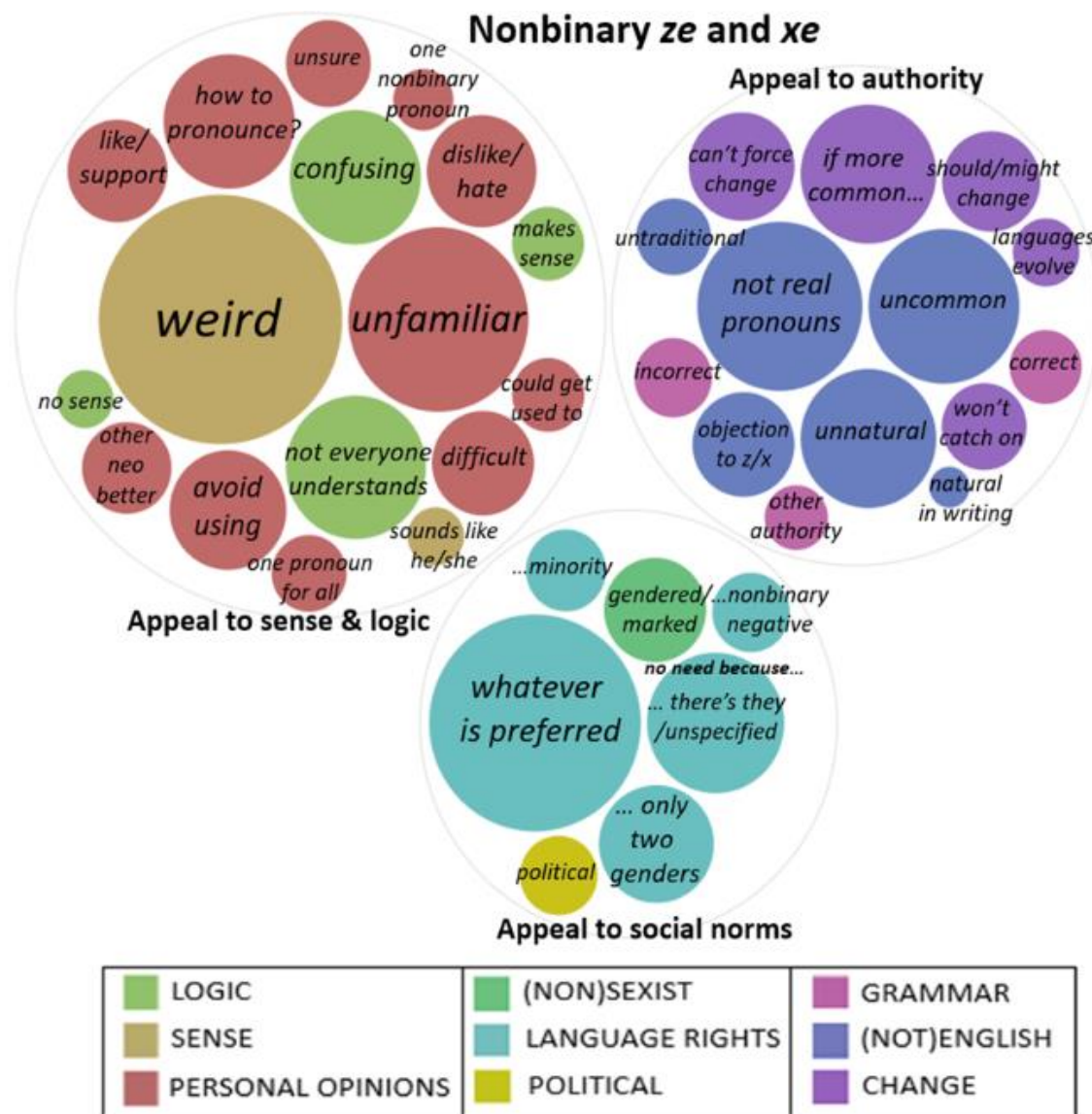


Figure 3. Thematic field for nonbinary neopronouns, based on 634 responses



#### 4.1.1 Appeal to authority

With **Appeal to authority**, the participants were seeking validation for their arguments from perceived language authorities. These authorities include grammar books, style guidelines, dictionaries, but also in a more abstract sense (native) language users, who

regulate language in their own day-to-day use (see Seargeant, 2007: 358). This main theme includes three themes: GRAMMAR, CHANGE and (NOT)ENGLISH.<sup>10</sup>

The GRAMMAR theme was more frequent for nonbinary *they*. This theme is characterized by arguments about *grammatical correctness* (example 1 below). While the neopronouns gathered roughly as many *correct* as *incorrect* comments, the responses to nonbinary *they* lean towards *incorrect*; a more nuanced reading reveals that this is related to the perceived *plural* nature of *they*. Indeed, many participants argued that since *they* is a plural pronoun, it cannot be used to refer to a single, known, person (examples 1–3). Many participants also objected to using overtly singular verb forms with *they*, while fewer than a dozen participants found the *s*-forms appropriate.<sup>11</sup> Especially when arguing against the neopronouns, some participants appealed to other language authorities, such as dictionaries and style guides (*other authority*, examples 4 and 5).

(1) *This is grammatically incorrect. It sounds like one person is more than one person [...] (**they**, incorrect, plural, P867)*<sup>12</sup>

(2) *It doesn't fit. 'They' refers to a group. (**they**, plural, P43)*

(3) *It's a plural pronoun and therefore should not be used in the singular. (**they**, plural, P554)*

(4) *'Ze' and 'Xe' are not recognised by any authority in the English language and are not gramatically [sic] correct. (**neopronouns**, other authority, incorrect, P212)*

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<sup>10</sup> Main themes are bolded, themes are capitalized, and subthemes are italicized in-text.

<sup>11</sup> Some of the examples in the survey used *-s* verb forms with *they*.

<sup>12</sup> The pronoun in question, the subthemes, and participant number are provided after each example.

(5) *If it's in the dictionary I'm okay with it (neopronouns, other authority, P723)*

The (NOT)ENGLISH theme on the other hand was much more frequent for the neopronouns. Most notably, the participants argued that the neopronouns are too *uncommon, unnatural, or untraditional* to be considered a part of English (examples 7–8). Some participants further objected by claiming that neopronouns are *not real pronouns*; included are descriptions such as *made-up, invented, or artificial pronouns* (examples 8–9). In addition, many participants objected to the consonants *z* and *x* specifically, which they claimed felt *alien or foreign to English* (example 10). Only a handful of participants felt the neopronouns were *natural*, and even then, mostly only in written language. Nonbinary *they* was also described as *uncommon* or *unnatural* by several participants, but some viewed it as a *natural* extension of generic singular *they* (example 6).

(6) *A good way of repurposing a word that already exists in the English language. More natural than using ze or xe or other similar pronouns. (they, natural, better than neopronouns, P337)*

(7) *Way too uncommon to feel natural. (neopronouns, uncommon, unnatural, P14)*

(8) *They sound unnatural and are artificially created words. (neopronouns, unnatural, not real pronouns, P250)*

(9) *The only context I've ever seen these words is mockery. I don't think they are English words outside of some online subcultures. (neopronouns, not real pronouns, P120)*

(10) *Z and X are just weird -- very uncommon letters used for a common thing like a pronoun. They emphasize the genderless pronoun as odd, rather than helping to normalize it. ESPECIALLY the X one... [...] because it seems Chinese. (neopronouns, objection to z and x, weird, P1146)*

The CHANGE theme was more common with the neopronouns. Most frequently, the participants were making predictions about language change. Some commentators felt that neopronouns *won't catch on*, since *they* already fills the gap (example 11), while others thought the neopronouns *might* or even *should* become acceptable. Some added that these pronouns can become acceptable only if they become more commonly used first (example 12). Similarly, some experienced the introduction of nonbinary pronouns as an attempt to *force others to change their language use*, often followed by an indication that language change should happen 'naturally' instead (example 13). In comparison, fewer participants viewed language change as something normal, ever-present (example 14); this perspective supported the adoption of nonbinary pronouns.

(11) *I've never heard these used and have a hard time imagining them catching on since 'they' is in wide use [...] (neopronouns, won't catch on, unfamiliar, P678)*

(12) *While at present they sound odd, with some use they would easily become normal. (neopronouns, if more common, might become acceptable, P662)*

(13) *You can't force change on a language [...] People will speak how they speak and any change will happen gradually over decades. You can't force made up words into everyday speech. (neopronouns, can't force change, not real pronouns, P909)*

(14) *It can be annoying to explain, but language is evolving and changing. These pronouns lack the history of they, but to refuse to use them due to newness is silly. New words are being invented and used all the time [...] (neopronouns, languages evolve, P671)*

The participants responses seem to be mostly associated with ideologies about standard and natural language, both relating to how language is regulated (e.g., Milroy, J., 2001). These perspectives are summarized as two 'ideological sentiments', the difference concerning *who* is regulating language.

(i) Language is regulated by grammar (or some other external system).

(ii) Language users regulate language.

The first sentiment posits that language is regulated by an external authority, such as grammar or dictionaries. Arguments about grammatical correctness and number agreement, as well as other appeals to language authorities rely on this sentiment. With the second sentiment language is thought to be internally or naturally regulated by its users through their day-to-day use of language, or more explicitly by acts of correcting the language use of others (e.g., Seargeant, 2007: 358). Hence, arguments about

commonness, conventionality, and naturalness are guided by this sentiment. Included are also arguments about how language should change *naturally*, through (unconscious) use of language. In contrast, changes that are explicitly introduced, or mandated, are considered as *forcing* language use. In this regard, the notion of free speech is also present, albeit it was not referenced explicitly by the participants.

#### 4.1.2 Appeal to social norms

In the second main theme, **Appeal to social norms**, the participants based their arguments on perceived social or cultural norms. Included are three themes: (NON)SEXIST, POLITICAL and LANGUAGE RIGHTS.

The (NON)SEXIST theme includes comments about how nonbinary pronouns are not gender neutral, but instead they are *gendered/marked* for being nonbinary (examples 15–16). Nonbinary *they*, on the other hand, was more often perceived to be gender neutral, *inclusive* and *universal* (example 17). The argument was that since singular *they* can already be used to refer to anyone, regardless of gender, this usage extends to nonbinary individuals as well.

(15) *Xe/ze don't seem gender-neutral to me, but instead seem to really emphasize that the person does not want to be called s/he [...] (neopronouns, gendered/marked, P46)*

(16) *Jesus, the who[le] mess is because English already has too many (2) gendered pronouns. Let us not add more! (neopronouns, gendered/marked, P322)*

(17) *they applies to any and everyone. (they, inclusive/universal, P225)*

Some participants further viewed the neopronouns to be *political* tools, but it was rarely verbalized what kind of an agenda might be behind using neopronouns (examples 18–19, 21). Nevertheless, neopronouns were imagined to be a feminist and/or liberal invention, while conservatives were imagined to oppose these pronouns (example 20; excluded from Figure 3 as infrequent). Noteworthy is also that only one participant expressed viewing nonbinary *they* as *political* (example 21).

(18) *Currently I wouldn't use it personally, 'cause of political connotations.*

**(neopronouns, political, P1)**

(19) *Extremely ideologically loaded words, I would never use. Strong association with 3rd wave feminism and its negative stereotypes. (neopronouns, political, avoid, P271)*

(20) *I think it's interesting, but I'm not sure how well it will catch on for english [sic] speakers, especially those with more conservative views. (neopronouns, conservative views, won't catch on, P244)*

(21) *Bad grammar, used by people involved in 'Identity Politics' pushing an agenda. (they, political, incorrect, P108)*

The LANGUAGE RIGHTS theme includes two polarized subthemes. Some participants considered pronouns as a matter of personal choice, indicating that *whatever pronoun is*

*preferred is acceptable* (examples 22–23). Others argued that *there is no need for nonbinary pronouns*. The most frequent reason was a belief that *there are only two genders*, hence the binary pronouns suffice (example 25). In addition, some participants argued that neopronouns specifically were *not needed because “they” already exists* (example 24). Others felt that neopronouns are *not needed because an insignificantly small minority of people use them* (example 26), while some argued that nonbinary identities are not valid, often using strong or even hateful language (*nonbinary negative*).<sup>13</sup>

(22) *It's acceptable when that's the individual's preferred pronoun. (they, whatever is preferred, P133)*

(23) *Nonbinary people are valid and should be allowed to use whatever pronouns they feel works best for them! [...] (neopronouns, whatever is preferred, P715)*

(24) *Acceptable but unnecessary because of singular they (neopronouns, no need because they exists, P962)*

(25) *[...] I don't care what Lee or Chris 'identify' as. It's either male or female, period. (they, only two genders, P1019)*

(26) *[...] They don't make up a big enough percentage of the population to require special pronouns to demarcate them. [...] (neopronouns, minority, P1141)*

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<sup>13</sup> No examples are provided since hateful comments need no more visibility. The comments often related to mental disorders or ‘attention seeking’.

While the neopronouns incited many overtly prejudiced comments, nonbinary *they* mostly avoided such comments. With *they*, the *negative connotation* comments relate to the pronoun instead of nonbinary individuals (under **Appeal to sense & logic**). These comments include viewing *they* as *dehumanizing*, similar to *it*, while others were bothered by the perceived plural status and linked it to having *multiple personalities* (see also Darwin, 2017: 330).

Ideologies about gender and equality seem to be guiding the participants' responses in this main theme. Again, two ideological sentiments represent these underlying ideologies:

(iii) Language should be fair.

(iv) Language should reflect reality.

The former sentiment is characterized by arguments relating to how language should be *nonsexist* and *inclusive*. These notions are related to viewing *they* as a pronoun that can be used to refer to anyone. The latter sentiment (iv) conveys that language should be representative of reality. However, how this sentiment is realized depends on one's gender ideology: believing in the gender binary supports the argument that *there is no need for nonbinary pronouns*, while acknowledging that gender is not binary supports viewing pronouns as a matter of choice, connected to the right to self-identify (e.g., Zimman, 2019).

#### 4.1.3 Appeal to sense & logic

The third main theme **Appeal to sense & logic** differs from the other main themes in that validation for the arguments was not sought from external sources, but instead from within: the participants were expressing how the pronouns *sound* or *feel* (SENSE), whether they viewed them as *confusing* (LOGIC), or how they personally felt about the pronouns (PERSONAL OPINIONS).

Overall, for many participants nonbinary pronouns still felt *weird* (or *strange*, *odd*, *alien*, included in SENSE).<sup>14</sup> However, *they* received more neutral comments than the neopronouns, which were often described as *ridiculous*, *silly*, and *stupid* (example 30). The pronunciation of the neopronouns was also of concern; many participants were bothered by not knowing *how to pronounce* these pronouns, while others felt *ze* and/or *xe* *sound too much like he or she* (example 27). Similarly, some participants made comments about how it is *difficult to learn new pronouns* (28–29); a few participants also wondered why there are so many different neopronouns, and whether there was a difference between them (example 30, excluded from Figure 3 as infrequent). As a solution, some participants suggested there ought to be *one pronoun for all nonbinary individuals*, while a few suggested *one pronoun for all people*, regardless of gender.

(27) *I feel 'xe' and 'ze' can sound too much like 'she' [...]* (**neopronouns**, *sounds like he/she*, P476)

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<sup>14</sup> Some conceptual overlap exists between the subthemes *weird* and *unnatural*, the latter belonging to the main theme **Appeal to authority**. While *weird* and *unnatural* can be understood to mean roughly the same thing, the distinction in this study is that the *unnatural* comments typically conveyed a sense of ‘unidiomatic’ or ‘not standard language’, whereas the *weird* comments lacked this indication.

(28) *I'm happy to use these when people request them, but they are harder - there's no standard so people prefer different neopronouns [...] (neopronouns, difficult, whatever is preferred, P562)*

(29) *[...] I think it would be selfish to even force people to remember multiple pronouns and how each individual wants to be addressed. (neopronouns, difficult, P78)*

(30) *[...] why would there be 2 different words if they are meant to represent a broader group of people. Is there a difference with the 2 words [...] Makes no sense and sounds stupid in mouth to use letters z or/and x to refer to person. I don't like it. (neopronouns, difficult, weird(stupid), makes no sense, objection to z and x, dislike, P33)*

The other PERSONAL OPINION comments included expressions of *like/support*, *dislike*, and comparisons between the neopronouns and nonbinary *they*. Overall, nonbinary *they* was clearly more favorably received, it was often described as the *ideal* choice (32), or if not ideal, then *the best available solution* (example 33). Indeed, many participants explicitly stated that *they* is *better than the neopronouns*. Only about a dozen participants felt the opposite was true (*neo better*, 31). Similarly, the *dislike/hate* comments were more frequent and harsher in quality for the neopronouns. Some participants also reported explicitly *avoiding* the use of neopronouns, sometimes even when asked to use them (example 34), while *they* elicited only a few such responses (hence excluded from Figure 2). One reason for this contrast between *they* and the

neopronouns may be that a substantial proportion of participants were simply *unfamiliar* with neopronouns (example 35).

(31) *I strongly support the widespread adoption of ze or xe (prefer xe) because it eliminates the confusion surrounding they (neopronouns, support, neo better, P239)*

(32) *I view this, or simply not using pronouns, as ideal in this situation, because it does not make assumptions about the person's gender or preferences. (they, ideal/like, inclusive/universal, P341)*

(33) *Acceptable for now since we don't have much of anything better to use, but very inelegant given potential confusion with plural / 'unknown person' sense of the word. (they, not ideal (but), confusing, P1146)*

(34) *Not real words. People are to request stuff like that. I wouldn't do it (neopronouns, avoid using, not real pronouns, P915)*

(35) *Nobody would know what this means. I've never heard of this. (neopronouns, not everyone understands, unfamiliar, P1097)*

The LOGIC theme was more frequent among the responses to nonbinary *they*. Most notably, the participants found the usage *confusing* due to the *plural* connotation; many insisted that *they* could refer to some unnamed, plural referent instead of the given antecedent (*Lee* or *Chris*, example 36). The neopronouns were also perceived as *confusing* (or *distracting*), but for a different reason: the participants were concerned that *ze* and *xe* would not be recognized as pronouns at all (example 37). Similarly, there were

concerns that *not everyone would understand what neopronouns mean*. Moreover, while some participants saw nonbinary use of *they* as an extension of generic singular *they* (*inclusive/universal*), others felt that *singular they only functions as generic*, rejecting nonbinary use (example 35). Included in the LOGIC theme are also general comments about how nonbinary pronouns *make (no) sense* (example 30, 38).

(36) *I find it confusing. That is, does Chris love Chris' dog, or does Chris love Chris' and Lee's dog? (they, confusing, P1115)*

(37) *Extremely confusing as the expressions above are not widely used. Who or what is the thing being referred to? (neopronouns, confusing, uncommon, P68)*

(38) *Once you name an individual it makes NO SENSE to then use 'they'. A general person can be 'they', George cannot be 'they'. George can only be 'he' or 'she'. (they, no sense, only as generic, only two genders, P877)*

While no distinct ideologies such as above could be linked to **Appeal to sense & logic**, two ideological sentiments were identified nevertheless:

(v) Language should sound good.

(vi) Language should be understandable.

The former sentiment is linked to arguments about how nonbinary pronouns *sound/feel weird, strange, alien or foreign*. These arguments are associated with linguistic purism; the idea that there is a superior form of language that needs to be defended and protected from ‘foreign elements’ and changes (e.g., Walsh, 2016: 7–9). The latter sentiment (vi)

relates to prioritizing the communicative function of language; language use should be understandable, and not *confusing*, demonstrated by the participants' concern about neopronouns being incomprehensible, or the plurality of *they* causing confusion. Yet, even such seemingly logical arguments seem slanted, as they were directed much more frequently at nonbinary pronouns than conventional generic pronouns. Hekanaho (2020) demonstrates that while the participants generally embraced generic singular *they* without any objections, they raised concerns about confusion and the perceived plurality of the pronoun with nonbinary *they*.

A final note here concerns the nature of attitudes and ideologies. It is acknowledged that explicit statements do not always reflect a person's "true beliefs", or underlying ideologies (e.g., Rosa & Burdick, 2016: 107). Indeed, there may be several reasons why someone might not verbalize their inner thoughts truthfully, for example a desire to comply with what is perceived to be socially accepted or desirable in a given context. Explicit attitudes may also function as lay rationalizations or justification for particular viewpoints (Silverstein, 1979: 193). In this sense, they may also function to camouflage underlying, socially undesirable views. As such, some of the participants' arguments, for example those relating to grammatical correctness, may well be functioning as overt justification for opposing nonbinary pronouns for other reasons, such as discomfort with nonbinary identities.

#### 4.2 Which stances are linked to acceptability?

In addition to their open responses, the participants assessed the acceptability of the pronouns. Overall, nonbinary *they* was found acceptable by 66% of the participants, while



the pronoun is *uncommon*, or *unnatural* does not seem to affect the acceptability assessment. The discussion below focuses on some key observations, supported and guided by a more comprehensive understanding of the data.

Most notably, the right to choose one's pronouns (*whatever is preferred*) is strongly linked to acceptance. In contrast, binary indications (*only two genders*) are linked to rejecting the pronouns, as are negative views about nonbinary individuals (*nonbinary negative, minority* comments). Indeed, these subthemes seem to be most polarizing among the participants.

Grammatical correctness is also strongly associated with acceptability; viewing the pronoun as *incorrect* and the arguments about *they* being *plural* are more frequently linked to rejection, while viewing the pronoun as *correct* supports acceptability. However, comments such as *grammatically incorrect but acceptable* demonstrate that for some speakers, correctness is not linked to acceptability, hence *incorrect* and *correct* comments are found under both modes.

Viewing the neopronouns as *political* was typically negatively loaded, linked to finding them unacceptable. Most of the participants characterizing neopronouns as *not real pronouns* or *objecting to z and x* also found the pronouns unacceptable. Similarly, the *can't force change* subtheme is more frequently related to rejection.

*Weirdness* and incomprehensibility (*confusing, not everyone understands*) also seem to weigh towards rejection but are not infrequent with acceptance either. Being *unfamiliar* with neopronouns somewhat more often led to finding them unacceptable, as did finding these pronouns *difficult*. Interestingly, while *like/support* is expressed much

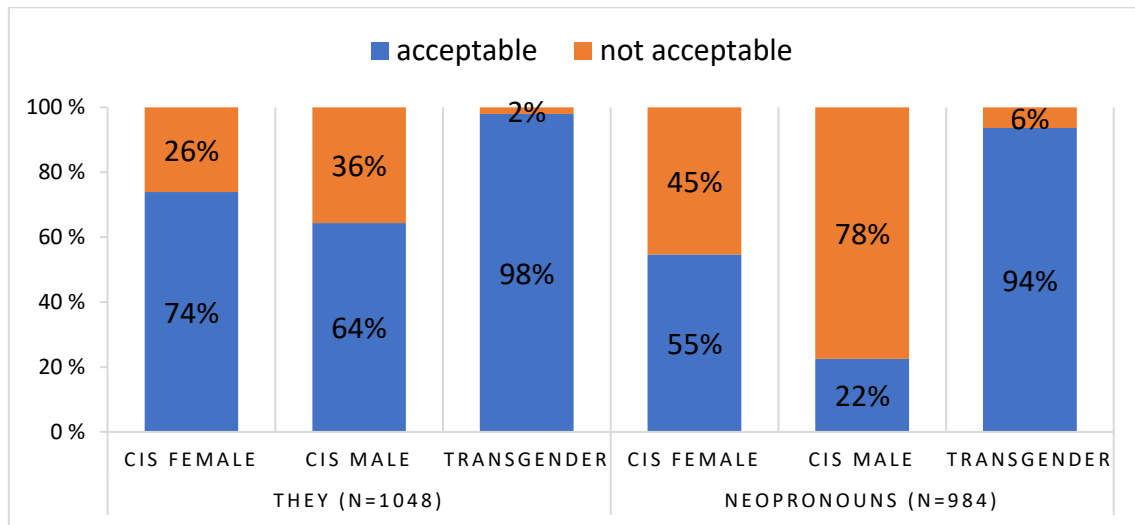
more commonly when the pronoun is viewed as acceptable, the *dislike/hate* is distributed more neutrally. It seems that personal dislike is not a reason to reject a pronoun.

Overall, it seems that acceptability may be affected by several different aspects, but perhaps most notably by social norms and ideologies related to gender, i.e., believing in the gender binary, or believing in the right to self-identify and choose one's pronouns. Why most of the subthemes were associated with both acceptance and rejection remains an open question. This result may be due to the study design in two ways. First, acceptability was defined in a way that may have led some participants to think of separate concepts, naturalness and correctness. Second, reflecting the complexity of language attitudes, many participants voiced several different views on the same pronoun, coded as different subthemes. As such, the participants may have placed different values on different perspectives, leading some participants with seemingly similar arguments to different decisions with acceptability.

#### 4.3 Observations on gender and native language of participants

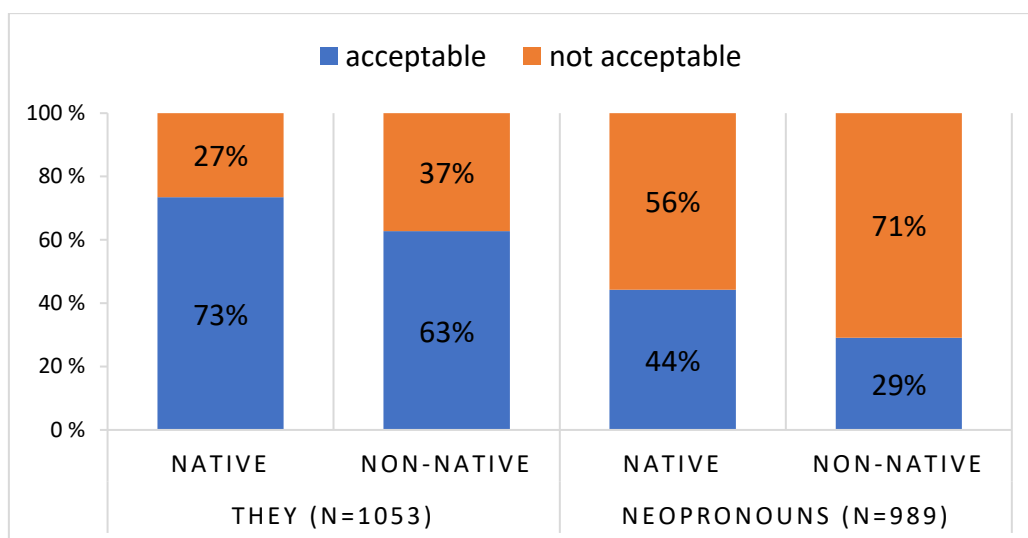
Last, while the present article cannot extensively explore differences based on the participants' background, a few observations are warranted (for full analysis, see Hekanaho, 2020). First, there was a clear difference between transgender and cisgender participants. Overall, cis male participants most often rejected nonbinary pronouns, particularly the neopronouns (rejected by nearly 80%). In comparison, cis female participants more often accepted both types of pronouns, while nearly all transgender participants did so (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Acceptability and participants' gender, inconsistent responses excluded



This difference was also reflected in the participants' open comments, as most of the negatively loaded comments derived from cis participants. In contrast, transgender participants generally expressed support for the pronouns. However, the supportive subthemes also include many comments from cis participants, for example nearly 80% of the *whatever is preferred* commentators were cisgender. Moreover, the transgender participants also generally preferred *they* over the neopronouns. This was also reflected in that most nonbinary participants (n=59) used *they* for themselves, while only 10 participants used neopronouns.

Figure 6. Acceptability and speaker status of English, bilinguals and inconsistent responses excluded



Second, there was only a slight difference based on native language, as somewhat more native English speakers found nonbinary pronouns acceptable (Figure 6). Two observations can be made from the open responses. First, native English speakers more often vouched for nonbinary *they*. Second, while Swedish speakers expressed support for the Swedish neopronoun *hen*, this was not translated into acceptance of *ze* and *xe*, which were viewed as less fitting than *hen*. Overall, it may be that native speakers of English are more familiar with new pronouns and usage, and thus more supportive, while non-native speakers' judgments may be more influenced by (outdated) prescriptive norms (e.g., Pauwels, 2010: 27), hence leading to rejection of novel usage.

## 5. Pronouns and (non)sexist language

Nonbinary pronouns can be linked to broader discussions on (non)sexist language, in which generic pronoun use has been widely debated since the 1970's (e.g., Curzan, 2014: 117–118). The question concerned *equal representation in language for women*; generic

*he* was shown to be male biased despite its intended gender neutral/inclusive use (e.g. Martyna, 1978). In order to provide linguistic visibility and representation to women, more gender fair options such as *he or she* were advocated (e.g., Wales, 1996: 119). However, it took much longer for prescriptive institutions to start advocating a truly inclusive pronoun, singular *they* (e.g., American Psychological Association, 2019). As nonbinary pronouns provide representation for nonbinary individuals, their introduction can be seen as the latest development in the strive for *equal representation in language*. Hence, it is not surprising that the results presented above share considerable similarities with previous studies on arguments against nonsexist language use (Blaubergs, 1980; Parks & Robertson, 1998).

Table 1. Thematic categories in Parks & Robertson (1998) vs. present study. \*no correspondence to nonbinary pronouns, but see Hekanaho (2020) for discussion of generic pronouns

<b>Categories in Parks &amp; Robertson</b> (1998: 452–453), based on Blaubergs (1980)	<b>Related subthemes in present study</b>
1. Cross-Cultural	no correspondence
2. Language is a Trivial Concern, i.e. “Sexist language is trivial compared to more serious injustices in society [...]”	infrequent “[...]if I have to constantly remember what weird new pronoun you want to be addressed with, I'll just get annoyed about you're [sic] insecurity about something as <b>simple and trivial</b> as the pronouns we use in everyday conversations.”
3. Freedom of Speech/Unjustified Coercion Example: “I do <b>not</b> believe that men or women <b>should change</b> their vocabulary on account of <b>a few outspoken liberal women!</b> ”	<i>can't force language change</i> “If you don't want to identify as male or female, that's fine, just <b>don't force me</b> to accommodate this into my everyday language” <i>minority comments</i> “I feel like we are trying to find a solution to a problem that only exists for <b>a very small minority</b> of people who happen to be <b>very vocal</b> about it [...]”

	<i>political</i> “Unneeded words invented by <b>liberals</b> in ivory towers.”
4. Sexist Language is Not Sexist	no correspondence*
5. Word Etymology, i.e. “The original meaning of a word is justification for its use.”	arguments about the <i>plural</i> status of <i>they</i>
6. Appeal to Authority, i.e. “The final authorities for the meanings of words are the dictionary, linguists, or people who are important in society or in our lives.”	main theme modified to include ‘language users’ as authorities, including <i>correctness, commonness, conventionality, not part of English</i>
7. Change is Too Difficult and Unnecessary, i.e. “Most expressions, particularly pronouns, are too deeply ingrained to be changed by individuals [...]”	<i>introducing new pronouns is difficult, neopronouns are difficult, won’t catch on</i> “This is very confusing and uncomfortable [...] <b>for the changing of very basic language</b> ” “[...] trying to introduce new pronouns into the English language is going to be <b>a difficult task.</b> ”
8. Historical Authenticity	no correspondence*
9. Sexism is Acceptable, i.e. “Males are superior to females, so it doesn’t matter if language reflects their superiority.” (p. 453)	‘Cissexism is Acceptable’; <i>no need for nonbinary pronouns because there are only two genders/because nonbinary individuals are a minority/because nonbinary identities are not valid</i>
10. Hostility and Ridicule, i.e. sexist language and its opponents are ridiculous (p. 453)	<i>weird (ridiculous), dislike/hate, and other negative comments</i>

Table 1 illustrates that many of the different types of arguments directed at nonsexist language use at large were also found in arguments against nonbinary pronouns. Many of the previous categories could have been applied to the present study (e.g., Freedom of Speech/Unjustified Coercion), while others fit only once modified (e.g., Sexism is Acceptable, Word Etymology). Yet the present study also demonstrated many additional views not captured by the previous typology, particularly by exploring supportive arguments as well (e.g., *whatever pronoun is preferred*).

In more detail, the Freedom of Speech/Unjustified Coercion category corresponds to the *can't force change* subtheme: a person should not be forced to change their language use. In addition, the perceived proponents of change remain the same in both studies, characterized as a *vocal minority of (extreme) liberals*. Trivialness was also expressed by the participants, but relatively infrequently.

The Appeal to Authority was adapted as a main theme in the present study, expanded to include language users as authorities, thus including arguments about *commonness* and *conventionality* in addition to *grammatical correctness*, *appeals to other authorities*, and assessments of nonbinary pronouns *not being part of English*. Related to this category are appeals to Word Etymology. While the original category concerns the previously claimed neutrality of masculine generics, similar comments were made about nonbinary *they*: since *they* is originally a plural pronoun, it cannot function as a singular pronoun in present-day English.

The Change is Too Difficult and Unnecessary is present in the subthemes relating to language change (e.g., *won't catch on*), and in comments about the difficulty of learning to use new pronouns. The common argument was that *changing or introducing new pronouns is difficult or even impossible because pronouns represent a stable or even closed class of items*. However, in the present study, some commentators also acknowledged that language change is a natural phenomenon, which supports the possibility of changes in pronouns as well.

The category Sexism is acceptable applies to the present study in a modified sense, Cissexism is acceptable, as the sexism was mostly directed at transgender individuals. Cissexist comments were most visible in the *no need for nonbinary pronouns* subthemes.

Included were comments invalidating nonbinary identities, as well as indications that minorities do not deserve their own pronouns. Similarly, the participants also expressed Hostility and Ridicule towards nonbinary individuals and supporters of nonbinary pronouns in various ways.

Recently, Vergoossen et al. (2020) studied attitudes towards the Swedish neopronoun *hen*, adopting the typology by Blaubergs (1980) and Parks & Robertson (1998). With some modifications, the existing categories captured most of the respondents' (n=168) arguments, but two additional categories were still needed: Gender Identification Is Important and Distractor in Communication. The former category includes comments supporting binary pronouns and opposing gender neutral pronouns as depersonalizing. While the present study did not include any comments highlighting the importance of binary pronouns, some of the participants of the present study viewed *they* as dehumanizing (*negative connotation*). The latter category shares similarities with the *confusing/distracting* comments in the present study, although Vergoossen et al. highlight that *hen* was found to be distracting specifically due to the perceived *political* nature of the pronoun. Similar to the present study, Vergoossen et al. also identified cissexist arguments, which were used to reject nonbinary pronouns (2020). Interestingly, Vergoossen et al. (2020) also found two commentators who rejected generic use of *hen* because they viewed *hen* as a specifically nonbinary pronoun. This perspective was also brought up by the participants of the present study, but it only concerned the neopronouns; the double agency of singular *they* was generally not challenged.

The present study, and the studies by Blaubergs (1980), Parks and Robertson (1998) and Vergoossen et al. (2020) demonstrate that arguments directed at nonsexist language

and nonbinary pronouns share considerable similarities even in different contexts. If these attitudes generalize to other languages besides English and Swedish, this might indicate that resistance to change has little to do with specific linguistic items, but rather with the ideological basis for the changes, as Vergoossen et al. (2020) also propose.

## 6. Discussion

This article has demonstrated a variety of attitudinal and ideological reasons for the rejection and acceptance of nonbinary pronouns. In particular, the data has illustrated the controversial, polarizing nature of nonbinary pronouns. Nonbinary pronouns were often faced with loud resistance, particularly from cisgender participants refusing to accept that gender is not a binary construct. Yet, many participants also showed support for the pronouns, most commonly by expressing that each person has the right to choose their pronouns, with the indication that individuals have the right to self-identify (e.g., Zimman, 2019; see also Conrod, 2019: 126–127). However, the considerable support may also be due to some of the biases in the sample.

The skewed representation of various demographic groups in the sample is one notable limitation. Overrepresented in the sample are young, highly educated, self-reported liberal and feminist individuals. Nevertheless, the study still managed to demonstrate considerable attitudinal variation, and the similarities to previous studies provide further validation for the findings. Another limitation concerns the study design. *Ze* and *xe* were used as examples of neopronouns, but since many participants objected to the initial consonants specifically, it raises the question whether the responses might

have been more favorable if other neopronouns were used as examples instead. Further research ought to explore different neopronouns.

The results highlight one particularly important aspect: nonbinary *they* and the neopronouns incited rather different reactions. Overall, the neopronouns were much more controversial than *they*, being rejected much more frequently, and much more vehemently. Indeed, even when similar arguments were directed at both pronouns, the neopronouns were judged more harshly. In comparison, nonbinary *they* seems to be more widely accepted, avoiding much of the critique the neopronouns elicited. This is likely due to the different statuses of the pronouns. The neopronouns are new and unfamiliar to many, while nonbinary *they* is an expansion of already familiar and well-established singular use of *they* in various other contexts. This may reflect a more general trend of associating “familiar” with “good”, and “unfamiliar” with “bad”, guiding the participants’ reactions (e.g., Song & Schwarz, 2009).

Considering the nonbinary participants’ preference for this pronoun as well as the public support and acknowledgment nonbinary *they* has received, it seems like *they* is becoming the standard nonbinary pronoun. Interestingly, singular *they* is also gaining other new uses, including reference to known, binary-identifying individuals in contexts where gender is irrelevant or unspecified for other reasons (Bjorkman, 2017; Hekanaho, 2020; Konnelly & Cowper, 2020). The intriguing question then is whether *they* will eventually take over *he* and *she* as a nongendered third person singular pronoun. Only time will tell.

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