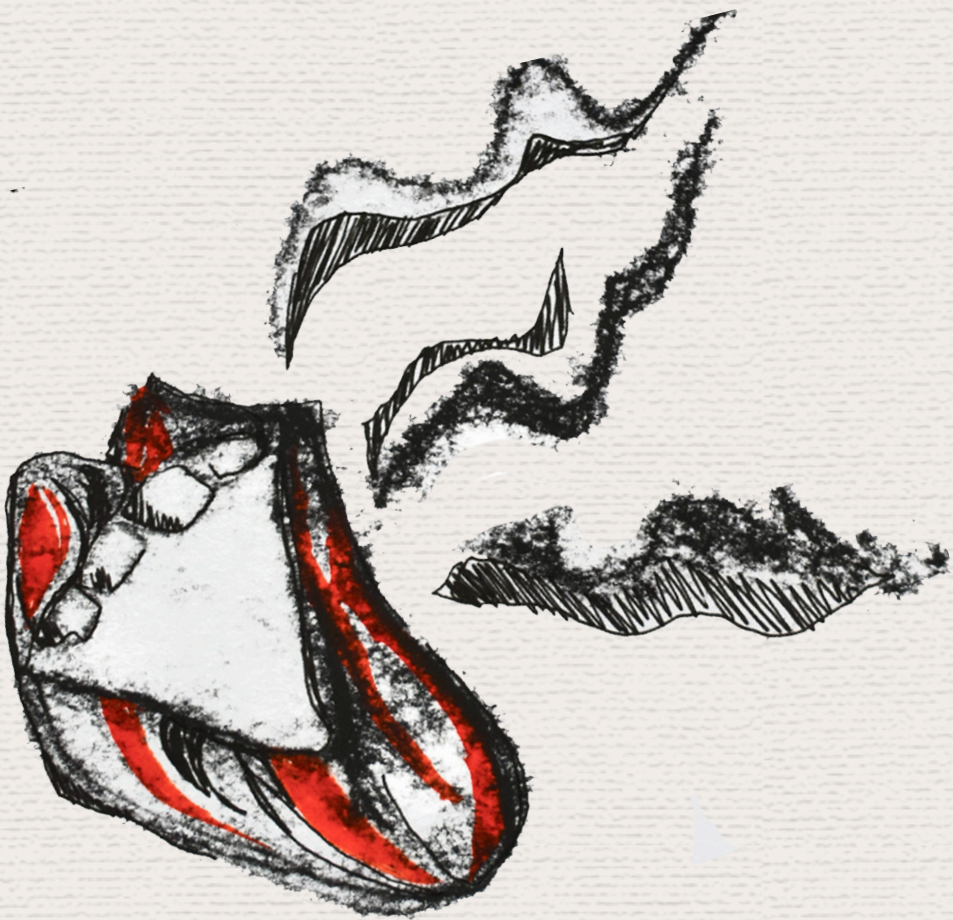BY ELLIE ROBERTSON

REMOVING THE BINARY:

An Exploration On the Impact Language Has On Our Gender Perception

ARTWORK BY BESSIE SCHOFIELD

Language, as a reflection of societal values and beliefs, wields the power to shape perceptions of gender, often perpetuating a binary understanding through grammatical gender systems. The influence of the generic masculine and masculine norm within languages with dense grammatical gender reinforces this binary, marginalizing communities and centralizing power within the masculine form. Despite these challenges, endeavours towards gender neutrality within grammatical gender languages offer hope, particularly in their potential to benefit marginalized groups like the LGBTQ+ community. However, while recent advancements demonstrate potential for gender neutrality within language, the possibility of achieving a genuine 'gender-free' language remains a question, especially within grammatical gender languages and beyond. In order to begin answering this question, one needs to understand the concept of 'gendered language' and how it has impacted our perception of gender throughout history. It is also necessary to analyse how recent linguistic adjustments impact the LGBTQ+ community and the changes in attitudes towards non-binary spaces. By comparing attitudes towards gender in grammatical gender and genderless languages, we gain insight into the intricate relationship between language and societal norms. To do that one needs to look at the contemporary languages such as English, Spanish and Swedish, which are undergoing gender-neutral adaptations within the core lexicon and grammar. In addition to indigenous languages that have historically included a form of gender neutral language. In essence, this examination of language and gender dynamics offers the conclusion that it is possible to remove gender from language, yet cannot change the impact that gendered language has already had on society's perception of gender.

Gender Inclusive Language: The Erasure of The Woman

In linguistic terms, grammatical gender is defined by languages that use a nominal morphological system

(Papadopoulos, 2019). However, just like gender, languages can also be viewed as a spectrum categorised by linguists into three categories: grammatical gender languages, natural gender languages, and genderless languages (Chatzidavidou, 2023). Most of the languages that use extreme forms of grammatical gender categorise all nouns into two categories, masculine and feminine, whilst also ensuring syntactical agreement between adjectives and pronouns (Hord, 2016). Speaking a language that consistently labels inanimate objects as feminine or masculine causes speakers to be stuck within a binary perception of gender (Jakiela and Ozier, 2018, p. 9). Ultimately, using a grammatical gender language that employs a binary causes many speakers to think of gender as a dichotomy. For example, it is commonly accepted that the concepts of 'sun' and 'moon' are opposites. In Spanish, a grammatical gender language, this opposition is marked through gender ('*el sol*' and '*la luna*', with '*el*' being masculine and '*la*' being feminine) (Vergara, 2020). Therefore, it can be assumed that speakers of a grammatical gender language separates and differentiates gender as two different concepts, masculinity and femininity (Papadopoulos, 2019).

This can also be said for grammatical gender languages without the binary, - in many natural gender languages such as German, there exists three genders: masculine, feminine and neuter. However, it still causes a gender dichotomy as it poses masculine and feminine as opposites (Mazzuca et al., 2020). Whilst the idea of the neutral or *neuter* does break from the binary system of gendered language, it does not propose the concept of other as it cannot be used in place of the binary in reference to biological gender (Pieciul-Karmińska, 2018). As such, natural gender languages that have the existence of a neuter continue to be stuck within the binary, as *neuter* does not offer itself as a placeholder when the

gender is unknown (Pieciul-Karmińska, 2018). Pieciul-Karmińska expands on this relationship by highlighting the idea that the nouns in the neuter form in gender are looked at as universal figures, impersonal almost (2018, p 121). The use of neuter gender is a purposeful choice especially within translation, even though it has equal validity it is not used in place of biological gender, but instead it is used to convey impersonal characters something that everyone can relate to. The use of neuter in Polish offers a different outlook, Pieciul-Karmińska highlights that the neuter in Polish is considered substandard, a noun to be used only if necessary (2018, p. 119). This has a major impact on the cultural outlook of gender neutrality, with most speakers viewing the neuter as inferior to gendered markings (2018, p. 119). It is evident that in languages where the neuter exists, such as German and Polish, they continue to express a dichotomy with each having a significant impact on the cultures view of neutrality. The idea that grammatical gender language supports a dichotomy highlights the fact that gender and language are intrinsically linked, impacting our perception of gender. This raises the question of whether gender-neutral language can even exist within languages that have grammatical gender, especially when even those which do not adhere to the binary continue to reinforce a dichotomy (Mazzuca et al., 2020).

In order to even start promoting the existence of gender neutral language within grammatical gendered languages, one needs to begin with the decentralization of men. The sociolinguistic concept of decentralizing men and ceasing the use of the generic masculine within grammatical gender has been a continuous focus within feminist politics for decades (Saul and Diaz-Leon, 2017). American philosopher Marilyn Frye (1983) argues that the gender marking within language, (such as *she/he* in English and even noun markings such as *el/la* in Spanish), promoted male dominance through the dichotomisation of men and women. Frye highlights the fact that gender marking encourages the idea that men and women are so different that language has to indicate so (Frye, 1983). Therefore, in order to create an equal society, one would have to remove these markings from language (Frye, 1983). However, many sociolinguists have argued that removing all gender indicators would ultimately alter the structure of language and cause it to collapse (Teso, 2010, p. 138). A more pragmatic adaptation of this argument would be the inclusion of gender neutral indicators. Alternatively, some linguists argue that simply adding gender-neutral indicators is not sufficient and could eventually impede the evolution of language. They suggest that there is a limit to the number of minor changes a language can undergo before a complete structural overhaul becomes necessary (Spinelli, Jean-Pierre Chevrot and Léo Varnet, 2023) However, before considering a complete restructuring, a small yet crucial change would be to stop using the generic masculine form in order to ensure genuine neutrality. The simplest example of the generic masculine or the masculine norm would be the use of the masculine when the gender is unknown or when making a generic statement, most commonly found in textbooks discussing 'man' or 'mankind' (Nazlıpınar Subaşı, 2020). Whilst it may be a simple way to refer to humans, it promotes the idea that women are 'other' and not the standard to humans (Nazlıpınar Subaşı, 2020). The use of the masculine norm is not only prevalent in English but also languages using a more extreme grammatical gender such as Spanish. Most commonly used examples include the use of *chicos* (the masculine plural of 'boy') when referring to a mixed gender group. This term used to be considered gender neutral, however, many argued that it contributed to the omission of women from the conversation and also aids male dominance with the masculine version of the noun becoming the standard for all (Saul and Diaz-Leon, 2017).

Removing the Binary

Social Sciences
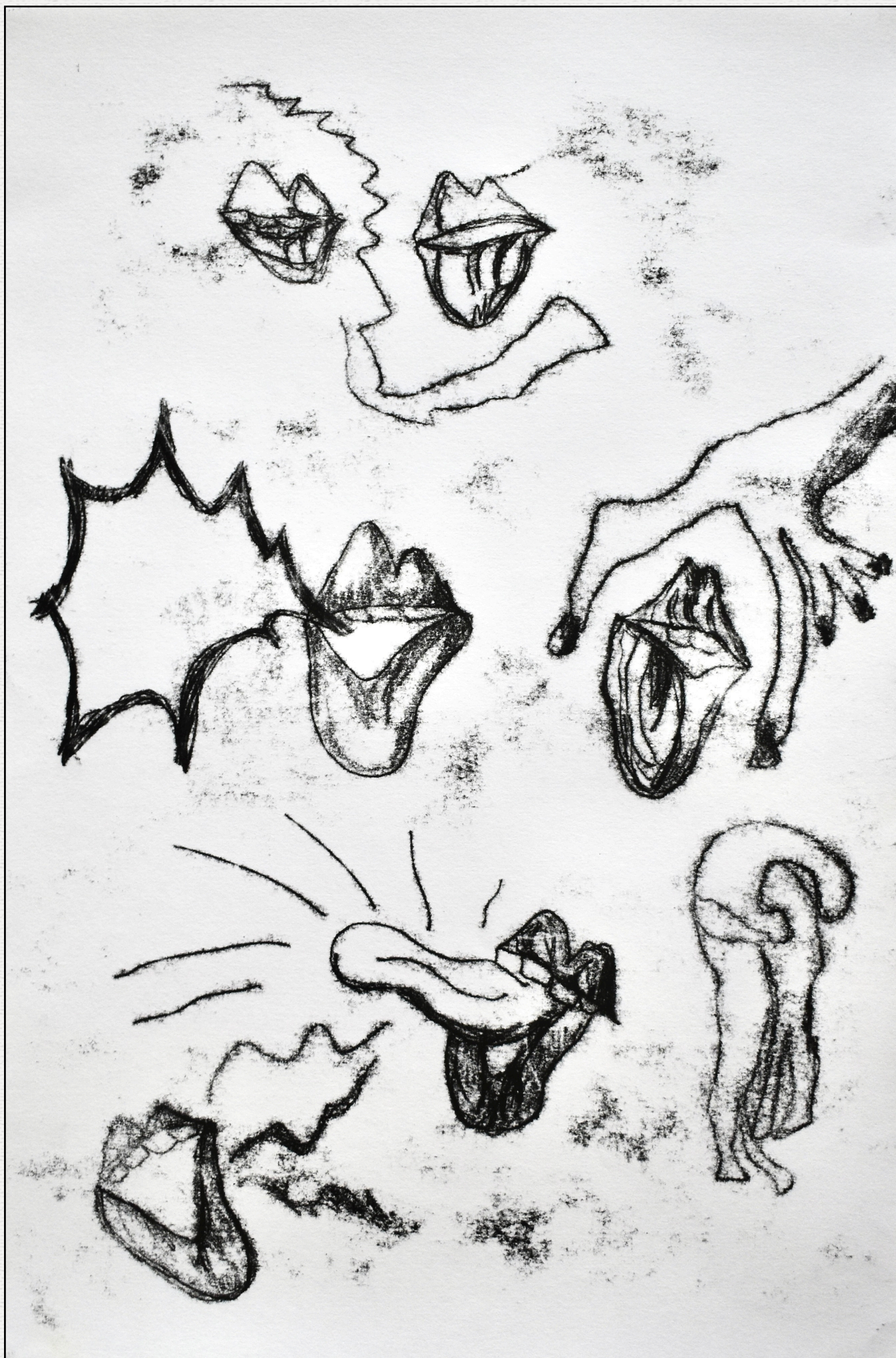
ARTWORK BY BESSIE SCHOFIELD

Whilst this conversation has mainly focused on pushing the visibility of women, it does not consider the impact that the generic masculine has had on the queer community by ultimately omitting them from the conversation. The use of the male generic and masculine norm also disregards those who do not align themselves within the gender binary and halts the progression of genuine gender neutral language (Gustafsson Sendén, Renström and Lindqvist, 2021).

Gender Inclusive Language: The Inclusion of Queer Identities

To say that there has not been attempts of removing the binary within grammatical gender languages, would be false. Perhaps the most recognisable example of this would be the use of 'they/them' as a singular person pronoun within the English language. The use of these pronouns becoming more normalised outside of queer spaces has led to criticisms that it defies the structure of the language. However, the use of 'they/them' as singular person pronouns is not an unknown linguistic structure within the language, having actually been used for years in replacement of the generic masculine when the gender is unknown (Arnold, Mayo and Dong, 2021). Regardless, even if it was a new pronoun, English would not be the first nor only language to introduce new pronouns to try and escape the gender binary. In the last decade or so, there has been a new pronoun within Swedish (a natural gender language) referred to as *hen*. First used within queer spaces in the late 2000s to early 2010s, this pronoun is used as a way to battle the binary and to promote the inclusion of non-binary identities (Vergoossen et al., 2020). The 2012 introduction of this pronoun into mainstream society via a controversial inclusion within a children's book has been relatively successful, with it mainly being used orthographically (Wallner and Eriksson Barajas, 2022). Whilst not yet commonly used in speech, many continue to advocate for this pronoun as language change happens gradually over time (Wallner and Eriksson Barajas, 2022). In Sweden, the use of this pronoun has been successful in reference to people when their gender is unknown or out of the binary. However, it is clear that even despite the reluctant acceptance of this pronoun within Swedish society, it was mainly queer feminist communities that were fighting for the inclusion of this additional pronoun (Milles, 2011). Therefore, it can be assumed that the gender neutrality progression within language would not be as advanced or prominent without queer voices (Bouteillec and Garnier, 2020).

Pronouns have not been the only way that gender neutral language has evolved, as more recently there has been development of gendered terms (Prewitt-Freilino, Caswell and Laakso, 2011). As previously mentioned, the term to refer to a mixed gender group in Spanish has normally been *chicos* but more recently there have been attempts to neutralise this term with an 'x', '@' or even by altering the spelling completely. However, many advocates have disapproved of the use of the '@' as it still fits within the gender binary (Bonnin and Coronel, 2021). Similarly to the discourse surrounding the addition of pronouns, many people argue that the change of these terms has tainted the simplicity of their language (Vázquez, 2020). However, as language is a part of our society it should reflect the reality of society currently, which would result in the inclusion of gender neutral terms (Vázquez, 2020). Additionally, these developments of grammatical gender have immensely benefited LGBTQ+ youth, as they become more included within their learning environment. It has not only impacted their engagement within their learning community but also their mental health, as the less they are omitted from the conversation the more they feel a part of society (Silva and Soares, 2024). Therefore, the evolution of gender-neutral language, whether through the adoption of pronouns like '*they/them*' in

English or the introduction of terms like 'hen' in Swedish, reflects a progressive shift towards inclusivity and recognition of diverse identities, ultimately fostering a more supportive and equitable society for LGBTQ+ individuals, (particularly youth).

Whilst some might perceive the solution to achieving gender neutrality as making all languages devoid of gender distinctions, the advocacy for gender neutrality extends beyond languages that operate within the binary framework and even transcends linguistic categorizations of gender altogether. Whilst there might not be grammatical gender within genderless languages, gender can be portrayed linguistically in other ways, such as phonologically (Rose, 2015). In many indigenous languages, it is common for gender to be indicated through phonetics and lexicon rather than grammar, resulting in something called 'male/female speech' (Rose, 2015). This dichotomy of speech is a natural occurrence in many indigenous languages such as Garifuna and Thai, as a result of societal and cultural conditioning (Rose, 2015). Similarly, it is also evident in western languages for example Irish sign language as a result of differing educational systems (LeMaster, 2006). This form of gender indication can cause more societal pressure on women to be perceived as ladylike and to not speak masculinely (Igbe and Damkor, 2021) and also resorts back to the masculine generic, with that being viewed as the standard speech pattern (LeMaster, 2006). Therefore, it is evident that language perpetuates gender stereotypes even without the existence of gender markers. However, in many indigenous communities such as Zuni and Anishinaabemowin (Krisitianto, 2016), it is commonly accepted that 'a man that speaks like a woman' (and vice versa) is a person who wields two souls, which many sociolinguists translate as someone who is non-binary (Robinson, 2019). This gender system existing within indigenous communities promotes the acceptance of gender neutrality within their

language, despite clear phonological gender markings, as 'two spirited' people were often considered healers of their community, wielding power that others do not (Kristianto, 2016). It is also found that speakers of genderless languages are often more accepting of other genders, as they are not stuck within the concept of the gender binary (Robinson, 2019). This is aided by gender roles in indigenous communities not being homogenous, they are not stuck within a universal dichotomy, instead they understand that each community has different needs that are expected to be fulfilled by different genders (Robinson, 2019). This understanding leads to a more open mind, a mutual acceptance that is not gender or sex that matter but instead what is needed for the individual and community. In essence, this embracing of gender neutrality within indigenous communities illustrates how language can serve as a conduit for cultural acceptance and understanding, ultimately transcending the limitations of the gender binary (Robinson, 2019).

At the beginning, the possibility of a true genderless language was posed, and by exploring this topic one can conclude a disappointing yet hopeful result. Despite endeavours to decentralize men and eliminate the generic masculine, achieving true gender neutrality necessitates broader societal shifts. While progress has been made, such as adopting singular they/them pronouns in English and introducing gender-neutral terms like hen in Swedish, indigenous languages demonstrate alternative approaches to gender expression, often with greater acceptance of non-binary identities. However, these progressions towards gender neutrality do not erase the impact that gendered languages have had on our perception of gender. This highlights the idea that removing gender binaries from language requires not only linguistic changes, but also societal shifts. It is up to society as a whole to shift our perception of gender and alter

our language in order to achieve gender neutrality. This can be done so by providing a more comprehensive education on gender identity from a young age, which like it has been said will not only create a more inclusive in enviroment for LGBTQ youth but also help others truly understand the importance of neutrality. This necessary shift in perception will ultimately help reduce judgments of introducing inclusive language, and help to aid the understanding that language change is needed to keep up with the modern world. In short, the world is changing, like it always has done, and therefore language needs to change too. Until we do so, female and queer communities will be continuously under-represented within our language. In essence, genderless language is not something that can be achieved imminently, but by shifting broader societal perceptions of gender and actively reforming our language, we can strive towards a more inclusive and equitable linguistic landscape.

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