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## The Myth of Neutrality: Linguistic Influence in the Integration of Nonbinary Identities in English and German

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# The Myth of Neutrality: Linguistic Influence in the Integration of Nonbinary Identities in English and German

## Abstract

Grammatical structures that differ among languages can affect the way people of different cultures think, speak, and behave. Because of its close ties with identity, language also has the ability to manipulate the way people view themselves and others. Ethnographic research among English and German speakers shows that these differing grammatical structures affect the integration into society of nonbinary, intersex, and agender individuals through a grammatical predisposition for gender neutral language. As such, the means of increasing social integration of these groups also differs between linguistic and cultural borders.

## Keywords

Gender, Language, German, Social Integration, Nonbinary

## Disciplines

English Language and Literature | German Language and Literature | Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies | Linguistic Anthropology

## Comments

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The Myth of Neutrality: Linguistic Influence in the Integration of Nonbinary Identities in  
English and German

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May 6, 2019

I had never given nonbinary identities much thought until one play rehearsal when a fellow student was crying over being called the wrong pronoun. It seemed like just a small misstep, except that this student had been openly nonbinary for the last four years during which they had been interacting with this professor and had asked to go by “they/them” pronouns in every new interaction. I was aware that some people prefer to be called “they/them” rather than “he” or “she,” but the topic had always been relatively distant. Then, here was this situation in front of me where their uncommon yet not unreasonable request was being rebuffed by a short “I’m just too old to learn anything different,” only to be rejected at every turn. I began thinking about other times I may have witnessed such comments in the periphery of my life. I then wondered how much education and grammatical rules really do affect the difficulty some people have with using a different set of pronouns. Of course, then, I had to look deeper.

With the way that the world affects our physical bodies to such an extreme, it is easy to imagine the mind as a body part that belongs only to the individual, untouched by the outside world. However, just because the world does not have physical contact with our brains does not mean that it has no effect. As a student of anthropology and psychology this fact is clear to me. The specific effects of language, on the other hand, have always seemed more abstract, more difficult to pin down. The way that incorporeal language interacts with minds we cannot see is an interesting conversation. Obviously there are differences among languages, differences in vocabulary and structure and grammar. People think differently too. But, what is the connection between these two?

Using ethnographic research among English and German speakers, I argue that different grammatical structures affect the integration into society of nonbinary, intersex, and agender people through the grammatical potential for the adoption of gender neutral language and aim to

find the gender-neutral pronoun that will most quickly be widely adopted by the wider speech community.

We will begin with an overview of anthropological literature on linguistic relativity and the role of language in social integration to give a theoretical framework for the research. This will be followed by a discussion of background information regarding grammar, LGBT+ history, and cultural differences between the two fieldwork sites necessary to contextualize the data. A more thorough description of the methodology behind the fieldwork itself will come next, and finally followed by the findings collected during the fieldwork. Lastly, I will provide a quick overview and directions on where this research could be taken further and put into practice.

### **Literature Review**

The idea of language influencing thoughts is not a new one. Originating as “linguistic determinism,” researchers have been exploring the influence of linguistic structures on the way people think since the 19th century. The rigidity of language “determining” the way people think originally faced a good deal of pushback, especially from those in favor of universal grammar. As such, after a good while of back and forth with convincing data emerging from both sides of the debate, “linguistic relativity,” also known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, was proposed to focus on the influence of language more broadly than the previous idea that language “determines” the way that people think (Ahearn 2016). This theory of linguistic relativity was more broadly accepted than previous iterations since it more freely navigates the border between different theories due to the looseness of the definition of the word “influence.”

Similar to culture in general, language can have quite a few different manifestations of influence. Like culture, language has shared agreements of significance (Cameron & Kulick 2003, 15), is used to classify a person’s social position (Bennett et.al. 2009, 154; Boa &

Palfreyman 2000, 8), is learned and reinforced over a lifetime of experiences (Nicholas 2011, 64), and changes slowly over time (Hord 2016, 8). These manifestations of culture are what demonstrate the influence culture has on individual lives. Therefore, these manifestations of language should also indicate the influence of language.

In the words of education anthropologist Teresa McCarty, “[t]here is no way in which language can be ‘context-less’ in this anthropological tradition,” (McCarty 2011, 10). Language is born from thoughts, and thoughts are influenced by the way they are structured. As such, the specific influence of language is dependent on the specific linguistic ideologies shared by the speech community. This is not as simple as looking in a grammatical guide since these ideologies are mainly spread through parents, peers, teachers, and even strangers who engage together with the language (McCarty et.al., 2011). For example, performative sentences are sentences or phrases that, when spoken under the correct circumstances, have the power to alter the state of something. For example, at a wedding, legally a couple may be married when they both sign the court document saying so, but socially the couple become married when they say “I do” and the officiant pronounces them married (Corwin 2009). The spoken language, in this situation, despite just being words, acts as the moment and catalyst of transition specifically because the community is in agreement about the meaning and significance of that phrase.

Because of these agreed-upon meanings language can also be used to signify social positions. There are certain cues that have been developed throughout time to declare to which social group a person belongs. Whether these are clothes such as headscarves and branded shoes, a specific way of moving and holding yourself, or something linguistic such as an accent or last name, these all tend to have more meaning for people past cosmetic preferences (Bennett et.al. 2009, 152-3). Just like these physical objects, language can be manipulated to present a certain

image to the world. People can use commonly accepted ideas about how certain types of people should or should not speak to create “publically available interactive signs” (Corwin 2009, 4) regarding how they wished to be perceived. In this way individuals have the ability to seize control of their language towards an end.

Anthropologist and member of the Hopi tribe Sheilah Nicholas (2011) describes how this process works. As a member of the Hopi tribe, she explains, indigenous language is seen as a social marker because it allows people to impart and engage in traditional knowledge. “[T]he customary way things are done and expressed,” Nicholas explains, “serves to remind, reinforce, and keep the concepts of the Hopi way of life and messages,” (Nicholas 2011, 64). This then forms a link between linguistic and cultural competence. Even though the language may only be a small part of the culture, it is the main avenue of imparting cultural knowledge and traditions.

It is true that ways of speaking and relationships with language can vary even within a group. However, folklorist Alan Dundes explains that “[i]f a group of people does have a peculiar constellation of personality traits, these traits are likely to be expressed in a wide variety of cultural manifestations,” (1984, 5), which means that unique combination of influences can manifest in ways slightly different from others because of the many possible varieties of manifestations. Additionally, influences do not occur linearly but can replace other influences, add more nuanced influences, or make an influence stronger. For example, people who experience microaggressions tend to have lower self-esteem and are at greater risk for both depression and alcohol abuse (McNab 2018, 20). That means it is not the singular instance of experiencing something that changes a person but the repeated exposure to it that slowly builds salience of the influence.

These agreements held by speech communities, similarly, are not learned instantaneously but are learned and reinforced through experiences. In the words of one historian, “Human beings have no fixed, inherited nature. We become human only in human society,” (Podgug 1992, 258). All throughout history, people grow their personalities according to the influences that surround them. These divisions, acts, social cues, and ways of speaking are not intrinsically learned but developed over time. The Guugu Yimithirr in Australia are one of the best examples. The Guugu Yimithirr language is heavily influenced by cardinal directions (Deutscher 2010). Everything from general greetings to the passage of time requires knowing one’s current orientation in relation to the north, south, east, and west. Having to reference these directions is not a problem either since the Guugu Yimithirr are always aware of which direction they are facing relative to their landscape. It is likely, then, that the emphasis of cardinal directions within the language appears because the landscape itself and knowing one’s position relative to it is important within the culture. Since there are not many records of the language actually forming, researchers have quite the “chicken and egg” situation on hand where it is unknown if these people become hyper-aware of their cardinal positioning because the language required it or if the language was developed to refer often to these directions because they were culturally important. Either way, it is clear that the children of the Guugu Yimithirr are not born with finely tuned internal compasses. They learn over time that these directions are important and develop their sense of direction over time with the help of other members of their community who continuously reinforce this skill.

Additionally, this reinforcement is not always done purposely or consciously. It is difficult to predict what people will attune to at every moment of the day, but, usually, people are more aware of what is going on around them than what might be assumed. For example, one

Navajo adolescent describes the process of his changing relationship with the Navajo language. “My dad speaks English when he is working,” he says, “and my mom speaks both...English and [the Indigenous language]. But if they were to go outside [the reservation], they would speak English,” McCarty et al 2011, 38). His parents may not intend to teach him that Navajo is only appropriate to speak on the reservation, but their actions and decisions act as an example of behavior that is appropriate. Later, hearing people at school make fun of his accent reinforced his learning ““to speak schooled English,”” (41) in order to be taken seriously outside of his home. In this way, language ideologies and practices are not decided according to some vague authority but by public consensus that has the ability to become widespread only if people experience them and decide to repeat and reinforce them (Hord 2016, 8).

Lastly, through these processes of reinforcement, language, like culture, has the ability to be changed slowly over time if enough people within a speech community adopt and reinforce the change. People have a tendency to view aspects of language such as grammar as based on traditional, inflexible rules and that ““language change is equated with language decline,”” (Hord 2016, 8). The existence of these beliefs indicates that linguistic change is normal, yet people tend to be resistant to change because their behavior and assumptions have been reinforced while discordant cues are usually ignored (Douglas 1975, 51). Thus, people are generally suspicious of new linguistic patterns while language itself is viewed as a timeless, natural state of things despite its evolving nature (McCarty 2011, 10).

Additionally, people generally do not like sudden change. While it is true that language and culture are constantly changing, it is a slow process; similar to the rotation of the Earth, always in motion yet feeling endless and still in the moment. There are many factors that could affect the speed of change. On the side of the population, researchers have found that time is the

most significant variable in the adoption of linguistic change. Specifically, this was seen in the five years it took for the gender-neutral “hen” to become widely accepted in Sweden despite the projected 10 years that the study would be collecting data to analyze (Gustafsson 2015, 6). In this case, in the anticipation of linguistic change, it seems that there is nothing to do but wait for a small change to become widespread.

The above manifestations of shared agreements of significance, classifying social position, lifetime learning and reinforcement, and changes over time clearly show the potential effects of language on culture and its potential for change. Now it is equally important to consider the ways that language is used to mark, emphasize, and reinforce identity at the personal level. Language is extremely closely linked with identity. Language is important for identity to emphasize recognition and acceptance (Hord 2016, 5). This is especially true for when people undergo transitions or transformations that do not hold a physical transition. While this can be used to celebrate aspects of identities, such as a student who finally graduated with a doctorate using the honorific Dr., language has historically been unfortunately used to break down and destroy identities as well. That strong link between language and cultural competence that Nicholas brought up previously, for example, means that if someone grows up completely engrossed in their identity as a member of the Hopi tribe but later in life develops an insecurity revolving around the language, such as with the aforementioned Navajo adolescent, then that linguistic insecurity can fester into insecurity in the entire, personal Hopi identity (Nicholas 2011, 54). While the exact avenues of influence may then be unclear, it is obvious that language, external and internal, can have a huge impact on a person’s identity.

This link has even been historically weaponized. Many cultures have faced language as a tool used to erode their indigenous identity after a major upheaval brought on by invasion and

colonization (McCarty et.al. 2011, 35). One of the largest examples in American history is the English-only schools that Native American children were forced to attend. These institutions were specifically aimed at erasing indigenous identity and did so through first targeting the indigenous language (McCarty, 2011). In many such cases of erasure of indigenous identities, indigenous experiences of social inequality can be traced back to a purposeful and foreign language shift that then shifted individuals' relationship with their native tongue.

Even after these clear examples of the deeply rooted power of language within culture, there may still be some doubt regarding the direct effect language has to influence the way people think. This requires a brief dive into quantifiable psychological data to support the rich anthropological theories that have been developed regarding this personal link with language.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity, has also been gaining attention in the field of psychology since around 1970 when psychologists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, inspired by recent research looking into how color is separated with terms in different cultures, discovered that people perceive a specific shade of color differently depending on whether they were Russian or American (Cibelli et.al. 2016, 6). The actual color itself could not be the difference because the wavelength being perceived did not change in the different contexts. The rods and cones being used to perceive the color were not being altered either. So, they looked at the next smallest difference: the language. This specific shade was somewhere on the spectrum between what English would call blue and green. Russian, however, has a separate primary color term for this in-between space. Throughout many different experiments, it was seen that Russian speaking participants did actually classify and perceive this color differently than English speaking participants because of this linguistic difference.

Additional evidence was collected by language and cognition psychologist Lera Borodowski who has done much research on differences in grammar based differences in cognition. In an experiment with German and Spanish speakers Borodowski and her colleague Jesse Prinz discovered that even something as small as grammatical gender can affect the way that people think (Borodowski & Prinz 2008, 127). In this particular experiment when Spanish and German speakers were given an identical picture of a bridge to describe, the Spanish speakers gave traditionally feminine words such as "beautiful, elegant, [and] peaceful," while the German speakers gave traditionally masculine words such as "strong, sturdy, [and] towering," which stemmed from the word for "bridge" having a masculine grammatical gender in German and a feminine grammatical gender in Spanish. The importance of this research is how it shows that, no matter whether culture influences language or language influences culture, language definitely has the power to influence the individual both cognitively and behaviorally.

As with linguistic change, people generally do not like change, which usually includes people who are different. The subjects of this research, people who do not identify as a man or a woman, face this resistance double-fold because people also generally are resistant to people and things that are outside of their usual divisions. Anthropologist Mary Douglas discusses why this occurs. There are many different external and internal signs people use to communicate their social identities to the world, and people like being able to know for certain where everyone belongs (Douglas 1975, 50). Therefore, people who inhabit this space between the gender binary that has been socially reinforced face a more difficult time being integrated because there is more reinforcement that has to be worked against. Even though identity may be an individual choice affected by a lifetime of outside cultural influences, things done unto an individual body are commonly seen as being done upon the greater community as well (Douglas 1996, 433). Because

of this angst people may have over change that Douglas describes, it is understandable that a group would be adverse to the insinuation of mass change that a single, personal change has. This uncertainty that comes from not knowing then causes a misdirection towards the individual where people become uncomfortable and unyielding about anything that blurs the nice lines.

Based on these theories, it seems that it might be possible to smooth this transition in times of linguistic change by using what is familiar to link to the unknown. What is familiar, however, is different to everyone. Since the way people think tends to be slightly different because of the language they speak, this research serves to figure out which forms of gender-neutral language will be most quickly accepted based on the different predispositions formed through different language usage in order to find the smoothest path towards inclusion of gender-neutral individuals.

### **Background**

The anthropological theory is half of what needs to be established to understand this current research. The other half is background information on the groups and cultures that we are discussing. We know that both culture and language are extremely multifaceted. That means we must establish some background information on the LGBT+ community, American culture and German culture in order to understand the exact factors we are focusing on.

#### LGBT+

The first thing to make clear about the LGBT+ community is that nonbinary, agender, intersex, and other gender-nonconforming individuals have existed for a long time in almost all corners of the world. Many cultures around the world have some kind of myth or mythology documenting either a third gender, such as the hijra in India, or people who are a combination of male and female, such as the Christian origin story of gendered beings coming from a bigendered

individual (see Dreger 1998; McNab 2018; Preves 2008). In fact, every continent except for Antarctica has held multi-gendered people who had important social or religious roles within their culture (McNab 2018, 33). We can question why gender-neutral language is not already prominent worldwide if gender-neutral people are not a modern invention as some believe.

Interest in LGBT+ topics and history has experienced a massive jump fairly recently with the reemergence of queer politics sparked by the AIDS epidemic (Turner 2003, 44).

Comparatively, then, it can be easy to assume that LGBT+ history began fairly recently as well. However, a large amount of queer history tends to be overlooked either because the information was disregarded for seemingly more important details or because their record was misinterpreted by modern definitions of gender and sexuality (Podgug 1992, 251-52).

This is not an historical research project, but historical context does have effects on the way that people and cultures evolve. With this in mind, let us dive further into historical contexts by looking at the differences between the United States and Germany.

### Site Comparisons

#### *Grammar*

Other than geography, the first obvious distinction between these two countries is that they speak different languages. The majority of the people living in the United States of America speak English. The majority of the people living in Germany speak German. Other than obvious vocabulary and sentence structural differences, grammatical gender is one of the biggest differences between these two languages.

Grammatical gender is a system of classifying nouns where the nouns are divided into categories that correspond to human genders (Hord 2016, 3). The gender of these nouns is then reflected through articles, adjectives, and adverbs. Languages like German and Spanish sort

nouns into genders somewhat randomly, though the grammatical gender is so ingrained in the language that mistakes in noun to grammatical gender association are “mistakes [that] belong to children and occasionally confusing neologisms and foreign loaner words,” (Miller 2018).

On the other hand, languages like English are naturally gendered languages in the sense that nouns generally do not have a human gender and instead referential gender agrees with the gender of the referent (Hord 2016, 3). Of course, there are times when English nouns seem to have grammatical gender such as when ships are commonly referred to using female pronouns. The difference is that the noun is not consistently, in informal and formal connotations, referred to with female pronouns and there are not specific adjective and adverb endings that depend on that gender. Whereas German has feminine [sie], masculine [er], and neutral [es] singular, third-person pronouns that, theoretically, are all used for people and objects, English has two singular, third-person pronouns, feminine [she] and masculine [he], that refer to people and one that refers to objects [it]. Of course, there are some languages, such as Chinese, that have no grammatical gender distinction (Hord 2016, 5); while this would be interesting to explore in a similar capacity, we will not go into the specifics of that structure since this research focuses on the two structures outlined above.

In English, pronouns also generally share some similarity between their different forms. “He,” “him,” and “his” along with “they,” “them,” and “their” both have the same beginnings while the endings of the word indicate the pronoun’s case whereas “she,” “her,” and “hers” is not quite as identical but still has some similarity with the inclusion of the “h” across all three forms. It, therefore, seems important for English pronouns to retain constant similarities across the different conjugations of the pronoun. Of the 80 neopronouns, a pronoun used in place of he, she, or singular they, proposed since the 1800s, the neopronouns “ze” (hir/hirs), “e” (em/eir), and

“xe” (xem/xyr) were selected as the English neopronouns for this project because they have been described as the most common neopronouns according to folklorist, librarian, and queer activist Charlie McNab (2018, 253). Some of these pronouns, like the binary pronoun “he” have identical beginnings while others are more like “she” where they vary across forms.

Meanwhile, in German, these parallels within the different forms seem less important since the possessives “sein/ihn/eurer” rarely match the nominative forms. “er/sie”. In the months of research leading up to fieldwork, information on German neopronouns was sorely lacking. Either the information was not readily available or these terms just had not been developed in this language. Research conducted in Germany with nonbinary individuals by Léah Miller corroborates this idea since her participants seemed unable to think of any pronouns to utilize other than the binary pronouns. I would very recently discover that this was incorrect, but we will delve further into that in the discussion of the results.

According to Borowdowski (2008), it is not just the content of language that matters, it is grammar as well. Pronouns are a very small part in the giant machine that is language, but even though pronouns are not the entirety of a person they do represent the entire person boiled down to one descriptor. This action of describing is what holds the power in this situation.

Psychologists Jonathan Schooler and Tonya Engstler-Schooler claim that descriptors stick in our minds more firmly than the actual memory of what was being described. In one experiment, they gave participants an image and randomly either asked people to describe the image or asked nothing. Later, when remembering the image, participants who gave the description remembered the description more than the image itself (Schooler & Engstler-Schooler 1990, 46). This result suggests that if someone is described incorrectly, that description is more likely to survive in

memory longer than the complex cues that communicate their identity. When people are described using a pronoun that one word may be more important than previously realized.

We will explore the impact of these grammatical differences later on. For now, let us continue our comparison of these two sites by looking at the culture.

### *Culture*

According to the frequency of the theme in public discussions and media throughout the years Germans seem to have been much more obsessed than Americans with the concept of *Heimat* throughout their history (Boa 2000, 23). *Heimat*, roughly translated as “home”, is a physical place or social space that connects people to a sense of something larger or a deeper history and is occasionally likened to the psychological need of identity formation (Boa 2000, 132). This difference may originate as early as the countries’ formations, as America was formed by the conquering of land and demanding freedom in the Revolution while Germany was a “patchwork of states” (Boa 2000, 1) that was dominated by Prussia until they were united. Additionally, the traits that are commonly used to define Germans as a unified group of people - orderly, disciplined, dutiful, lawful and having an obsession with cleanliness (Dundes 1984, 105) – are cited as coming from the country’s Prussian origin (Strote 2017, 81). This recurring theme seems to suggest that Germans are more focused on keeping past traditions alive than Americans may be.

As for the LGBT+ history that has influenced the current understanding of LGBT+ identities and inclusion, Germany’s queer history has been quite mixed. According to medical historian Günter Grau, homosexuality has been criminalized in Germany since the Middle Ages (Grau 1995, 1). Despite this, historical Germany was much more progressive than other European countries. There seems to have been quite an abundant and open gay community in

Weimar Berlin (Beachy 2014, x), and even some homosexual fraternization was accepted by the police to certain limits (Beachy 2014, 55). Part of this has been cited as the wish to not drive the activity further underground, but there is also documentation of the police taking important peoples or visitors of Berlin on tours of gay bars (Beachy 2014, 60). Eventually, homosexuality was decriminalized entirely in Germany in 1929 (Beachy 2014, 220).

As with many things in Germany, though, there was a massive shift with the Second World War. While homosexuality was not the biggest victim of this time, the Nazis did actively attempt to get rid of the act of homosexuality, mainly through re-education and labor (Grau 1995, 6). Such movements, including the destruction of Hirschfield's Institute for Sexual Sciences, did dampen a good amount of the progress that had been made in LGBT+ rights leading up to the 1930s. As political scientist Lothar Probst points out, though, it is important not to reduce Germany's long history to this singular time (Probst 2006, 65). Looking back on the concept of *Heimat*, it is also possible that this idea, which has been used to integrate people and resolve conflicts in the past (Boa 2000, 27), may cause most German citizens to attempt to bring back that previous progressiveness in an attempt to connect with a past *Heimat*. From this information, it can be inferred that Germany may be more accepting overall due to its progressive history with the LGBT+ community.

On the American side of things, it is clear that the LGBT+ community may not have as deep of a history of inclusion, but they have been at the forefront for the modern consciousness. The sheer fact that more than 80 neopronouns have been proposed in the last 200 years (Hord 2016, 11) shows that people have been aware of the issue that some people do not have widely accepted vocabulary to describe themselves. However, it is only recently that the history of the previously invisible or marginalized have been considered worth documenting by the wider

public (Turner 2003, 43) and historical research hints that the most acceptable places of exploring identity and sexuality not too long ago were in places of doubt and anonymity (8). This results in history, occasionally, being more forgiving than people might think regarding LGBT+ relationships and identities. A little further back in history, for example, transient workers would engage in homosexual sex for convenience since mainly men would be around during travel and they would not need to worry about someone getting pregnant (Johnson 2013, 89).

In some ways, then, the English history of LGBT+ inclusion seems to mirror the German, where LGBT+ community moves from being vaguely accepted to being forced out of the public eye with connotations of illegality and sin to moving more recently into a gray area where people are gaining recognition and rights such as marriage and legal sex changes. However, the American history is missing the institutional integration that Hirschfield pioneered.

### *City and Country*

The last comparison that needs to be made between the two fieldwork sites is the difference between one being a rural tourist town and the other being an urban capital city. These were the best sites for funding and opportunity at the time of research.

Similar to the binary of “male” and “female,” the descriptors “urban” and “rural” tend to be thought of as a binarism, or a pair of complete opposites (Johnson 2013, 11). For example, the country is seen as a place where you have to stop and greet every person you meet with a spot of polite conversation before moving on with your day (Rouse 2009, 162) whereas the city is seen as a place where “mysteries everywhere run like sap” (Turner 2003, 16) and people can shape-shift while walking down the street (19). However, the complete anonymity of the city and the celebrity of the country do not seem as cut and dry as that. For example, professor of gender studies Colin Johnson explains that rural and other small town communities tend to have a

tradition of looking the other way when encountering nonconforming individuals (Johnson 2013, 188). As such, it is difficult to tell which location may be predisposed to accepting gender-neutral identities.

On one hand, the atmosphere of mutual care (Morgensen 2009, 145) and polite ignorance of rural landscapes could mean that there is a culture of care and polite face acceptance. On the other hand, the generally younger populations (Johnson 2013, 109) and the constant shifting arrangement of urban planning (Weszkalnys 2010, 31) could mean that there is a culture that more readily accepts change.

Combining the above historical and linguistic contexts it seems reasonable to predict that Germans would overall be predisposed to accept gender-neutral identities rather than Americans. Additionally, I predicted at the beginning of this research that, despite the less grammatically ambiguous nature of neopronouns, the utilization of “they/them” for gender-neutral identities would end up being most widely accepted because it has continued to pop up as an adoption. On the German side of things, the answer seemed obvious. Because German is a grammatically gendered language it already has a third-person, singular gender-neutral pronoun in the form of “es.” Because of this, I predicted that German speakers would be predisposed to the adoption of gender-neutral language.

### **Methods**

With the background established, my fieldwork focused on four methods with permission from all necessary Institutional Review Boards. Although this research can be considered low risk, I knew there were sometimes reasons why participants would wish to not be identified. As such, all names and identifying information used in this thesis have been changed in order to protect the privacy of all participants.

I conducted three types of interaction with a sample of participants from a total of four different populations. Two groups consisted of nonbinary individuals and the other two groups consisted of a sample of individuals from the general population from each city in which fieldwork was conducted. The first interaction, completed with all four groups, was an ethnosemantic interview looking at the type of gender-neutral language people automatically use and what options they are aware of. From there, half of the participants from each group returned for a life history interview revolving around their experiences with learning about, encountering, and discussing gender-neutral identities along with their experiences revolving around composing and communicating their own gender identities. The other half completed a journal every three days for three weeks describing daily encounters, or lack thereof, with gender-neutral language, explicit identifying language, and the LGBT+ community in general. Lastly, as a function of living in both of these cities for a time, I completed participant observation in public spaces revolving around the language I heard and saw being used.

Since I was unable to find popular neopronouns in German and did not wish to create a large difference in the questions between the two linguistic contexts, a few neopronouns were created with the help of a German professor at the CIEE Global Institute in Berlin. These neopronouns were “ero” and “xier.” There were only two neopronouns instead of three because all three third-person, singular pronouns were used compared to the two in English and we wanted the number of pronouns asked about to be the same. In a similar manner to the neopronouns in English, one set matched across conjugations and the other was irregularly conjugated.

Due to my own unfamiliarity with city life how to plan and advertise in Germany, I was not able to interview nearly as many German participants as American. Fortunately, I was still

able to interview some people both from the general population as well as people who specifically identified as nonbinary. In order to make up for this lack of data on the German side of things, I used research by Léah Miller concerning the experience and perspectives of nonbinary Germans.

### **Data and Analysis**

Beginning with the data surrounding general gender-neutral language, each section of data will be discussed first from the perspective of the general public and then from the perspective of the nonbinary participants.

#### English

In English, despite the emphasis on the grammatical rules that seem to hinder some people from using gender-neutral language, such as in the story that opened this paper, there seems to be a unanimous agreement that English-speaking people naturally use “they/them” in reference to a stranger of unknown gender whom they are not interacting with. When writing people seemed to be more concerned with the grammatical integrity of this singular usage of a plural pronoun. However, all participants agreed that it sounds perfectly natural to say, “That person held the door open for you; they must be nice.” Thus, it appears that English speaking people are unconsciously used to this phenomenon, and the issue with consciously using this pronoun for a singular individual may come from reminding themselves about the grammatical rules they were taught.

Over time, people could be unconsciously building an association between the uncomfortable feeling of breaking rules that have been reinforced for decades and the identities that ask for these pronouns. One method of breaking such association is by constructing expectations of offering up pronouns instead of assuming them. For example, people can state

their pronouns during introductions or including a tagline at the end of an email signature or social media bio section that states the person's pronouns. Not every participant was familiar with this newer method, but most had heard of such examples even if they did not participate in the idea themselves. Overall, it seems that these actions are mainly used by celebrities working to show their support of gender-neutral identities or by institutions that have included these actions as a form of expressing openness to different identities as part of their inclusive policies. Even if these types of actions do not reach much further than academic and related institutions, the trend is slowly spreading.

As people who attend these institutions graduate and spread throughout the world, and as outside people encounter these actions through working with institutions, more and more people are becoming aware that offering up one's pronouns is an expected practice. In the words of Max, one of my nonbinary participants, this is a great phenomenon because “[i]t enforces the expectation that we find information about a person from that person and not just assigning them a role based on appearance,” (Interview July 15<sup>th</sup> 2019). This is useful for people who use pronouns that are different from what a stranger might assume, people with gender-neutral names such as Alex, Pat, and Max, for example, that, in an online context, are not paired with other cues as to how to refer to that person. Offering up pronouns is also useful for people who refer to new acquaintances because they do not need to worry about conflicting visual cues.

While there are times when nonbinary individuals are willing to accept incorrect pronouns in order to avoid confrontation, these moments can be emotionally exhausting over time. Based on the information gathered from my participants, knowledge of gender-neutral identities has spread much in the last few years, yet there are still many who do not know of or understand these identities. Max, one of my participants, describes how draining it can be to have

to educate everyone we meet: “I see and hear it said that it is not the responsibility of a member of any minority to educate someone not in that group about the identity they hold. It is true. It is so much goddamn work. You know this. You're a person with eyeballs and ear holes. And that wears away at you,” (Interview July 15<sup>th</sup> 2019). Because most of the western world has been trained to think in terms of the gender binary, despite the long-time existence of other genders, the responsibility has so far fallen upon gender-neutral identifying individuals to prove their existence or else be forced into invisibility.

Of course, the reasoning for using pronouns other than “she” and “he” is slightly different for everyone. Some gender-neutral individuals even prefer to use these binary pronouns or a combination of binary and gender-neutral pronouns. Alex, another one of my nonbinary participants, explains that the type of pronouns she is comfortable with different people using depends on how that person views Alex. Some people who have known Alex for a long time and view them as nonbinary may use any pronouns in reference to Alex. Other people, however, will use a binary pronoun with too much of that gender associated with Alex that then makes him uncomfortable with that label. Overall, what tends to fan the spark of an uncomfortable feeling into anger is the direct rejection of their identities or rejecting the explanation of their identity. Alex describes one experience with a “friend [of] about 20 years who when I told her she was like ‘Well, what does that mean?’ And we talked about it endlessly and still just this kind of, ‘I’ve always just seen you as just you.’ I’m like, ‘That’s kind of what I’m getting at but there’s kind of a word for it,’” (Interview July 9<sup>th</sup> 2019). Despite Alex’s patient temperament, the explanations become exhausting when people follow up with a statement such as, “Well I don’t see you like that,” because it rejects Alex’s own identity in favor of the stranger’s perceptions of them. More than direct rejection of the identity, Max gets pushed over the edge of patience by

rejection of the education, specifically the phrase “Well, you have to understand,” has become associated with this emotion over time. Xe explained, “Shush, *you* have to understand that I’m not fucking stupid. *You* have to understand that I grew up in the *same* binary earth, thanks. Treating me like I don’t fucking get it; that it’s different and unfamiliar,” (Interview July 9<sup>th</sup> 2019). In both cases, it is the willful ignorance instead of honest ignorance that moves things from a small miscommunication to a damaging statement.

As for neopronouns, familiarity seemed to determine how comfortable people in the general public felt using them. Participants were generally split as to whether they were familiar with neopronouns or not, but most had heard of at least one even if they had never used them. Of the three used, “em” was consistently rated the least comfortable with “zem” and “hir” remaining fairly on equal ground. Sentences using neopronouns also tended to stand out as strange because of the unfamiliarity. When I used sentences using the neopronouns in our interviews, most participants requested a repetition of the sentences or expressed confusion over the sound of the neopronoun. When writing, some participants expressed concern over being able to pronounce the neopronouns correctly. A majority of participants said that they would use neopronouns if specifically requested to but would not think to call someone by those pronouns without prompting. “They/them” continued to be ranked far above the neopronouns, much closer to the ratings of the binary pronouns.

Not all nonbinary participants were comfortable using neopronouns for themselves but did, on average, seem more familiar with neopronouns than the general population. They all found it relatively normal or polite to respect people’s pronouns even if they would need some practice to get used to them.

Only one of my participants, Max, actively used a neopronoun in reference to xemself. On first introduction, xe listed xyr pronouns as “they/them,” asking to go by “xe” only after it had come up in the interview questions. At first, this was confusing because xe seemed really excited to share that xe do indeed go by these neopronouns. Later, xe explained that, “[xe] usually introduce [xemself] with they/them/theirs because it is a set that people are already familiar with in at least some context. [Xy’re] a little shy to teach people xe, xem, and xyr on first meeting because [xe] want friends more than [xe] want that particular grammar lesson.” None of the nonbinary participants felt ashamed of their identity, but this idea of being careful when and to whom to reveal this part of their identity was common enough to become a theme. Ghosty, for example, said that he labels himself differently “according to the level of queer-knowledge” of the person he is talking to (Interview July 23<sup>rd</sup> 2019). It is clear that the subset of people who use neopronouns are smaller than the subset of people who identify as neither a man nor a woman, but with an abundance of caution in openly and continually asking to be referred by a neopronoun, it is possible that more people feel comfortable with these pronouns than might be assumed.

### German

Early on within this research, it came to my attention that the connotation for the general public surrounding the pronoun “es” has shifted over time. Theoretically, because all three singular, third person pronouns in German are used to refer to objects, none of them should have the dehumanizing aspect that calling someone “it” in English has. Historically, all three pronouns have been used to refer to people. In classic fairy tales, for example, the feminine “sie” is used to refer to women, the masculine “er” is used to refer to men, and the neutral “es” is used to refer to kids and “maidens,” or young girls. However, over time “es” has gained as similar a

dehumanizing aspect as “it” due to “er” and “sie” being used so often for people and “es” only being used infrequently. One German participant described using “es” in reference to a person as follows: “I would never call another human being or even an animal *es*. With an animal I might be more likely if I really can’t tell what gender it is, so I would be at a loss to sort of refer to it as something else. But, yeah, I would never refer to another human being as *es*. . . If someone were to then say, ‘No, please call me *es*,’ then I would certainly out of respect to them call them *es*. But I think out of impulse, out of instinct, I would never call anybody *es*,” (Interview July 23<sup>rd</sup> 2019) This change over time can even be seen in fairy tales; as one German professor pointed out to me, the traditional “es” in reference to “Mädchen” [maiden] has been recently replaced with feminine “sie” (Interview October 25<sup>th</sup> 2019).

Because of this connotation change, the linguistic options for German gender-neutral identifying individuals are severely more limited than in English. The option of using the plural pronoun of “they” is unavailable because the pronoun is the same as the feminine “sie” but with different verb conjugations. As such, using this plural pronoun with singular conjugations would simply turn the pronoun to feminine instead of neutral. Currently, then, German people who are not men or women do not have a pronoun to use for themselves. In the words of one of Miller’s participants, “If there were established ways to speak about nonbinary identities, I think I’d use a nonbinary pronoun. But because of the limits I just use *sie*, which solves the problem of dysphonia due to not being addressed like a man but still doesn’t paint the whole picture,” (Miller 2018).

As far as neopronouns go, the small sample of German speakers I was able to interview seemed quite confused and uncomfortable with neopronouns. This matches the fact that I was unable to find any record of neopronouns that have been brought up in the past in the German

language. In fact, most terms for queer gender and sexual identities in German are loan words from English (Miller 2018). This may be because of the slightly tighter relationship Germans have culturally with traditions. One participant, when given a sentence with a neopronoun in it, exclaimed “Dass hat, hat mich jetzt zerstoben” [That, that just killed me] (Interview October 28<sup>th</sup> 2019). Cameron and Kulick (2003, 27) remind us that there is a history of groups of people reclaiming terms that were once used as an insult and giving them a more positive connotation. As such, it may be more productive to work on changing the current connotation of “es” rather than developing a neopronoun for adoption by German speakers.

Only within the last week or so, long after I was finished with fieldwork, have I been able to find a source for neopronouns in German. As it turns out, neopronouns have been in development in Germany since 2008 (Ushachov 2014) with “nin,” “sif,” and “xier” being the most popular (Grenzenlos Deutsch n.d.). There are people, such as comic author Anna Heger (Heger n.d.), who do use these pronouns in everyday life, but, based on my research, these neopronouns have not become widely shared or acknowledged. Participants in Miller’s (2018) study also did not seem to be aware of any of these neopronouns. She posed the question “If you do not identify as a man or a woman, how do you address that in German?”. They answered simply, “I can’t,” (Miller 2018).

### Institutions

The famous philosopher Judith Butler once declared that “neither sex nor gender is politically neutral,” (McNab 2018, 6). This is because, while the institutions draw power from the populations that validate their claim to power, the decrees set in place by the institutions are for the sake of that population. In the case of gender-neutral language, institutions might include gender-neutral language in the wording of laws and make sure that gender-neutral individuals are

protected by hate crime legislations that usually contain no mention of these identities (McNab 2018, 10). Due to the two-pronged nature of this cycle, it is important to look at how language change affects and can be affected by both individual and institutional choices.

Looking purely at the spoken, everyday language, it would seem as if English is more integrated than German in terms of adoption of gender-neutral language. However, the opposite effect appears when looking at institutions. In the United States, there may be institutions that are becoming more expansive when it comes to pronouns, but there is still no official third gender option. There are a few laws in certain states that protect people's right to be called whatever pronoun they prefer (New York City Commission on Human Rights 2002), but federal legislation has not yet been passed on the matter (Moreno 2020). Meanwhile, Germany has recently created a third option on birth certificates. This "divers" [diverse] option is an actual option instead of an extended deadline of the binary decision (Bundesverfassungsgericht 2017). This change is seemingly not talked about very often because I could not find many large news articles discussing the subject, which may be a side effect of Germans having a much greater sense of personal versus public privacy than Americans. Still, the option is widespread enough that it appears on signage that includes gender. For example, I saw an advertisement on a cafe window looking for servers that could be "m/w/d" [men/women/diverse].

This shows that, overall, even though English currently makes more allowances for gender-neutral language, I would argue that the grammatical gender of German predisposes German citizens to acceptance of gender-neutral identities.

### **Conclusion**

Language and culture are both shared agreements of significance, used to classify a person's social position, learned and reinforced, and changing slowly over time. Being closely

linked with culture, language is closely tied to identity, as language is the avenue of transmission for cultural capital and reinforcement. The ability to build up and tear down identities by manipulating the emotional link between cultural identity and language is essential for the integration of identities into a wider society. As explained by Mary Douglas, people are uncomfortable with accommodating the unfamiliar (Douglas 1975, 51). Considering that people are generally averse to change, avoiding new terminology integral for specific identities, it makes sense that this linguistic block would be connected to the wider, cultural integration block.

Time changes most things, but sometimes that change does not come fast enough for the people being harmed in the process. Language is one of the most important avenues for change. If more harm is done by sheer ignorance or refusal to discuss concerns regarding gender-neutral identities, then the solution is to hold conversations in order to work on normalizing the identities. Such conversations are not possible, however, if people do not have the words with which to have them. An agreed-upon terminology with which to refer to gender-neutral individuals will make it possible to have conversations regarding these identities and therefore, lead to a reduction in violence against these individuals.

Language exists not only within the confines of our own minds. It is the product of a mix of cultures and traditions and thoughts from institutions and individual (Nicholas 2011, 58). It is an exploration of relationships (McCarty 2011, 44) and a signifier of membership to a group or community (McCarty 2011, 4). Even more than relationships, language also affects the discourses people create and, therefore, the knowledge they hold (Cameron & Kulick 2003, 15-6). With so much influence coming from this one extremely prevalent aspect of culture, it is therefore important to be aware of the language choices and changes we make in everyday life.

One of the greatest struggles faced by nonbinary and other gender-nonconforming individuals is the feeling of anger and rejection they feel when their requests for proper terminology, even just in casual conversation, are met with rejection and invalidation of their identity and priorities. In the English case, for example, their requested word choice is often met with confusion and frustration because people are unfamiliar with it or feel that it contradicts grammatical rules, despite the fact that most people find the usage of “they/them” for a gender-not-specified individual normal in everyday speech. With the prominence of the LGBT+ community and individuals who openly stand under the umbrella becoming more visible to the public eye, it is not surprising for gender-neutral language to be catching on. The question, then, is not whether the language will be used but what kind of language will be most quickly adopted.

This research has shown that “they/them” is spreading more quickly than neopronouns through the English language. Neopronouns may still become popular given enough time, but the singular “they” should be stressed out of all of these options in order to speed the process of social integration of gender-neutral identifying individuals. Neopronouns have yet to make a widespread appearance in some grammatically gendered languages such as German. For these languages, the emic creation of a neopronoun does not seem to have taken hold, perhaps because of the deep connection with history that German culture holds. Therefore, reclamation of an already existing gender-neutral pronoun will be the best solution to most quickly spread the integration of gender-neutral language through the population. “Es” may currently have a negative connotation, but reclaiming terms is not a new process and the historical connotations of the pronoun should make it easier to reverse the connotation than it would be to create a history for a new pronoun.

While the change is emanating from the individual level within the United States, the change is already manifesting within the institutional level of Germany. To complete this linguistic change, American institutions need to include “they/them” within their policies and the language used to express rules and regulations. For Germany, since there is already an official third sex, a pronoun needs to be taken up and used by the general public. Gender-neutral language is continuing to grow in usage, but the pace of change is slow. Making these two suggested changes in the United States and Germany will allow individuals who use these pronouns as part of their identity to be more quickly and seamlessly integrated into the general community instead of continuing to be separated into an “other” category.

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