

Boris Kern\* and Branislava Vičar\*\*

## Fostering Social Responsibility through Gender-Inclusive Language in Slovenian<sup>1</sup>

### Keywords

Queer linguistics, non-normative genders, non-binary gender identities, gender-inclusive language, transgender-inclusive language, Slovenian

### Abstract

In this paper, we explore the role of Slovenian in constituting non-normative genders. The poststructuralist turn in sociolinguistics brought with it new theoretical frameworks that questioned existing assumptions about seemingly natural social categories. Drawing on the perspective of queer linguistics that presents a fundamental challenge to the assumption that binary systems for categorizing gender and sexuality are natural, universal, and indisputable, we explore the extent to which grammatical gender both constrains and facilitates the realization of transgender and non-binary identities among speakers of Slovenian. In order to perform their non-normative genders, non-binary individuals use linguistic practices, such as the underscore, inverse gender markers, or blending feminine and masculine grammatical forms. Their social actions are both interposed by the social structure and can also lead to changes in it by decentering binary genders.

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\* ZRC SAZU, Fran Ramovš Institute of the Slovenian Language, Ljubljana, Slovenia;  
University of Nova Gorica, School of Humanities, Slovenia  
boris.kern@zrc-sazu.si | <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7733-5755>

\*\* University of Maribor, Faculty of Arts, Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures,  
Slovenia  
branislava.vicar@um.si | <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3878-9439>

## Spodbujanje družbene odgovornosti s spolno vključujočim jezikom v slovenščini

### Ključne besede

kvir jezikoslovje, nenormativni spoli, nebinarne spolne identitete, spolno vključujoč jezik, transspolno vključujoč jezik, slovenščina

### Povzetek

V prispevku preučujemo vlogo slovenščine pri konstituiranju spolno nenormativnih subjektov. Poststrukturalistični obrat v sociolingvistiki je prinesel nove teoretične okvire, ki so preizprašali obstoječe predpostavke o navidezno naravnih družbenih kategorijah. Na izhodiščih kvir jezikoslovja, ki predstavlja temeljni izziv predpostavki, da so binarni sistemi spolne in seksualne kategorizacije naravni, univerzalni in nedvomni, raziskujemo, v kolikšni meri slovnični spol omejuje in hkrati omogoča uresničevanje transspolnih in spolno nebinarnih identitet med govorkami\_ci slovenščine. Spolno nebinarne osebe za izražanje svojih nenormativnih spolov uporabljajo jezikovne prakse, kot so podčrtaj, inverzni spolni označevalci ali mešanje ženskih in moških slovničnih oblik. Njihova družbena dejanja so odvisna od družbene strukture, obenem pa lahko z decentralizacijo binarnih spolov vodijo k njenim spremembam.



### Introduction

In the past two decades (in the Slovenian linguistic and cultural space, approximately in the last decade), influenced by the movement for transgender equality, public awareness of gender-nonconforming individuals and the social marginalization they face has increased. The recognition of gender diversity is already reflected to some extent on the socio-institutional level; for example, many universities are implementing transgender policies,<sup>2</sup> identity politics with

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., “The University of Oxford’s Transgender Policy,” University of Oxford, last revision 2018, <https://edu.admin.ox.ac.uk/transgender-policy>; “Smernice za zaposlene na UM za podporo raznolikosti spolne identitete,” University of Maribor, accessed September 9, 2024, <https://www.um.si/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Smernice-za-zaposlene-na-UM-za-podporo-raznolikosti-spolne-identitete.pdf>.

a focus on the LGBTIQ+ community are increasingly present at the EU level,<sup>3</sup> and queer perspectives are becoming more prevalent in various fields of the humanities and social sciences, such as anthropology, psychology, literary criticism, art history, and especially in linguistics, since the construction of gender and sexuality and their related categories takes place in the field of discourse.

The proliferation of different gender concepts, which can be observed in Western culture since the 1990s, has also brought new terminology, including the introduction of the term *cisgender*, which refers to a gender identity that aligns with the sex assigned to a person at birth. The promotion of the term is not just about the need to name individuals who are not transgender, but also the need to draw attention to *cisnormativity*, which refers to “the idea that cisgender identities are ‘normal,’ ‘natural,’ and ‘factual,’ while transgender identities are ‘abnormal,’ ‘unnatural,’ and ‘fictional.’”<sup>4</sup> Thus, phrases such as “natural,” “normal,” and “real” gender legitimize the structural dominance of cisgender individuals.<sup>5</sup> Cisnormativity is also contained in the assumption that physiology, gender socialization, experiences, socially perceived gender, and self-identified gender will always align in expected ways.<sup>6</sup> The statement “We women are used to constantly looking for new face creams or choosing new skin rejuvenation treatments at the beautician’s,”<sup>7</sup> for example, refers to individuals who have acquired certain behavioural patterns through socialization. Besides erasing the intersectionality of gender with socioeconomic class, region, age, cultural context, and other identity markers, the statement also equates the category of women with individuals who were assigned female gender roles at birth. Such an equation implies that trans women are not women because they were not socialized as such.

<sup>3</sup> In this context, it is worth mentioning, for example, first-ever strategy on LGBTIQ+ equality in the EU, adopted in 2020 and aiming to integrate LGBTIQ+ equality into EU policies: “LGBTIQ Equality Strategy: 2020–2025,” European Commission, effective November 12, 2020, <https://commission.europa.eu/document/5100c375-87e8-40e3-85b5-1adc5f556d6d>.

<sup>4</sup> Lal Zimman, “Pronouns and Possibilities: Transgender Language Activism and Reform,” in *Language and Social Justice in Practice*, ed. Netta Avineri et al. (New York: Routledge, 2018), 176.

<sup>5</sup> Zimman, 181.

<sup>6</sup> Zimman, 181.

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Fišer, “5 vsakodnevnih navad, ki pospešujejo staranje—jih počnete tudi vi?,” *Lepota & Zdravje*, 2024, <https://revijalz.si/lepota/5-vsakodnevnih-navad-ki-pospesujejo-staranje-jih-pocnete-tudi-vi/>; our translation.

When we choose gendered labels, pronouns, and gendered morphemes, we usually start from our own perception of a person's gender, which is embedded in a binary and cisnormative framework. Referring to transgender and gender-nonbinary individuals thus reveals a specific range of linguistic misrecognition practices, which we understand as a manifestation of the dominant social order burdened with the binary schemes of perception and classification.<sup>8</sup>

Sociolinguistic analysis offers us tools for understanding the linguistic strategies that transgender and gender-nonbinary individuals develop to subvert cisnormativity and the gender binary, and to affirm and validate their own identities.

This article focuses on two linguistic strategies that have been adopted by individuals who do not conform to the binary gender matrix or are situated outside of it to ensure their own discursive existence: the use of the underscore and the use of pronouns and gendered morphemes, along with the complementary use of gender-neutral language. The material used in this article (i.e. excerpts from semi-structured interviews with gender-nonbinary individuals) was collected as part of a larger study conducted in 2017, and in 2019 two in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals with nonbinary gender identities.<sup>9</sup> The article also includes the results of the survey "Use of the Slovenian Language among Transgender Individuals" ("Raba slovenskega jezika pri transspolnih osebah"), conducted in collaboration with the NGO TransAkcija in 2017.

### Queer Linguistics and the Undoing of the Normative Conceptions of Identity

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Queer linguistics is a relatively young branch of linguistics that has so far established itself as the most widely spread paradigm within the broader field of language, gender, and sexuality studies. As a poststructuralist linguistic approach, it does not view language in the structuralist sense, i.e. as an abstract prerequisite on which language use would be based, but rather as the result of repeated linguistic practices that have over time led to the discursive materialization of

<sup>8</sup> Nina Perger, *Razpiranje horizontov možnega: O nebinarnih spolnih in seksualnih identitetah v Sloveniji* (Ljubljana: Založba FDV, 2020), 195.

<sup>9</sup> See Branislava Vičar and Boris Kern, "Možnosti jezikovnega izražanja nebinarnih transspolnih identitet v slovenščini," *Dialogi* 53, no. 11–12 (2017): 223–37; Boris Kern and Branislava Vičar, "Jezik in transspolne identitete," *Slavistična revija* 67, no. 2 (2019): 413–22.

specific structural categories.<sup>10</sup> Queer linguistics fundamentally challenges the assumption that binary systems of gender and sexual categorization are natural, universal, and unquestionable. In this sense, the starting point of queer linguistics is the endeavour to theoretically redefine *a priori* dichotomies such as male/female and heterosexuality/homosexuality.<sup>11</sup>

The potential of queer theory stems from the deconstruction of stable and unchangeable identity (on the axis of gender and sexuality), which is established in relation to *the other* and through its exclusion.<sup>12</sup> The queer subject opposes such identities by positioning itself outside them, i.e. outside the gender and sexual binary<sup>13</sup> (i.e. the cultural system based on the assumption that there are only two genders and two sexual orientations that exist in opposition to each other). In doing so, it does not take any specific position within social identity categories; it is a signifier without a stable signified, its content is filled individually, bypassing (repressive) identity categories, and is based on resisting normative systems<sup>14</sup> and on personal and social commitment to life outside them.<sup>15</sup> The queer subject can, therefore, signify individuals who align with an undefined multitude of gender and sexual practices that are established outside the normative assumptions of dominant social discourses, or, as Bucholtz and Hall state, “at the excluded margins of historically and culturally variable heteronormative systems.”<sup>16</sup> Its meaning is gained precisely in opposition to the norm, establishing itself as the antithesis of what is considered “normal,” legitimate,

<sup>10</sup> Heiko Motschenbacher, *Language, Gender and Sexual Identity: Poststructuralist Perspectives* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2010), 61–62.

<sup>11</sup> Jenny L. Davis, Lal Zimman, and Joshua Raclaw, “Opposites Attract: Theorizing Binarity in Sociocultural Linguistics,” in *Queer Excursions: Rethorizing Binaries in Language, Gender, and Sexuality*, ed. Lal Zimman, Jenny L. Davis, and Joshua Raclaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Nina Perger, “Med queer teorijami, queer politikami in gejevsko-lezbičnimi gibanji,” *Družboslovne razprave* 30, no. 77 (2014): 76.

<sup>13</sup> Perger, 72.

<sup>14</sup> Rusty Barrett, “Is Queer Theory Important for Sociolinguistic Theory?,” in *Language and Sexuality: Contesting Meaning in Theory and Practice*, ed. Kathryn Campbell-Kibler et al. (Stanford: Center for the Study of Language and Information, 2002), 27; Perger, “Med queer teorijami,” 77.

<sup>15</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 161.

<sup>16</sup> Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall, “Theorizing Identity in Language and Sexuality Research,” *Language in Society* 33, no. 4 (2004): 490.

and dominant.<sup>17</sup> The “queer moment”<sup>18</sup> is the essential element that distinguishes queer theory from gay and lesbian studies. Although the latter contains queer potential in terms of studying non-heterosexual identities, they do not necessarily presuppose a critical reflection on sexual and gender categories and their normativity, which is characteristic of queer theory.<sup>19</sup>

Queer linguistics does not study the language of a predetermined group of queer subjects, as such a group cannot be defined.<sup>20</sup> Instead, it signifies a shift from traditional approaches to language and identity, which view identity as an inherent trait of an individual, to understanding identity as the result of intersubjective practices and ideologies that do not necessarily operate at the conscious level. Intersubjective practice means that social identification is not merely a property of an individual but is inherently relational: in the process of social identification, the subject is both the agent, the subject *of* social processes, and the patient, subject *to* social processes that determine its subject positioning.<sup>21</sup> Queer linguistics focuses on the ways in which normative assumptions related to identifiable (gender and sexual) identity categories are established as part of the dominant discourse, in which normative reality is perceived as a natural given.<sup>22</sup>

The fundamental mechanism that underpins the linguistic construction of identity is the performativity of linguistic signs.<sup>23</sup> The concept of performativity originates from the philosophy of language, and Butler<sup>24</sup> introduced the concept to poststructuralist feminism and queer theory, applying it to the construc-

<sup>17</sup> Motschenbacher, *Language, Gender, and Sexual Identity*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*.

<sup>19</sup> Heiko Motschenbacher and Martin Stegu, “Queer Linguistic Approaches to Discourse,” *Discourse & Society* 24, no. 5 (2013): 520, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926513486069>.

<sup>20</sup> Barrett, “Is Queer Theory Important,” 28.

<sup>21</sup> Bucholtz and Hall, “Theorizing Identity,” 493–94.

<sup>22</sup> Vojko Gorjanc, *Nije rečnik za seljaka* (Belgrade: Biblioteka XX vek, 2017), 19.

<sup>23</sup> Anna Livia and Kira Hall, “‘It’s a Girl!’ Bringing Performativity Back to Linguistics,” in *Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender and Sexuality*, ed. Anna Livia and Kira Hall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3–18.

<sup>24</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

tion of identities. Performative utterances, such as “I bet you 50 euros,” “I appoint the defence committee,” do not merely describe the world but change it; i.e. performatives are linguistic social actions.<sup>25</sup> Among the variety of performative utterances, we can also recognize performatives that refer to identity categories. Statements like “It’s a girl!” or “I am a gay” have an illocutionary performative effect, as they cause a change at the moment of utterance, i.e. they place the subject within a particular identity category. For example, when a person is labelled a *girl* or a *boy*, along with the naming, normative behaviours prototypically associated with these categories are prescribed. The concept of performative utterance nullifies the traditional sociolinguistic understanding of identity as pre-discursively given<sup>26</sup> and introduces the notion that identity is constructed through linguistic and other semiotic practices. Performatives are not one-time acts but operate through continuous repetitions. Through repetitions of performatives that contain identity labels, the referent of a particular identity category is constructed both in the speaker’s mind and in the broader social discourse. As Barrett points out, “identity categories are created through repetitions of the assignment of individuals to particular categories and repetitions of statements attributing particular social attributes or practices to a particular category.”<sup>27</sup> Queer theory recognizes not only the linguistic performatives of identity categories as performative but also other aspects of social practices. From a performative perspective, gender identity is constructed through a system of interconnected repetitions of gender norms. Repetitions not only constitute the identity categories themselves but also limit the cultural acceptability of practices associated with particular identity categories; a subject who coherently repeats performatives that correspond to socially imposed gender norms establishes itself as an identifiable, culturally recognizable, i.e. gender-normative, subject.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Bucholtz and Hall, “Theorizing Identity,” 491.

<sup>26</sup> Kira Hall, “Exceptional Speakers: Contested and Problematized Gender Identities,” in *The Handbook of Language and Gender*, ed. Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyerhoff (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 373.

<sup>27</sup> Barrett, “Is Queer Theory Important,” 29.

<sup>28</sup> Branislava Vičar, “Kvirovsko jezikoslovje v kontekstu poststrukturalističnih jezikoslovnih pristopov,” in *Slavistična prepletanja 5*, ed. Gjoko Nikolovski and Natalija Ulčnik (Maribor: Univerzitetna založba Univerze v Mariboru, 2024), 230.

## Perceptions and Classifications of Gender in the Context of the Binary Social Matrix

Socially dominant schemes of gender perception and classification represent a manifestation of the existing binary social order, which holds the status of being natural, “unquestioned and supposedly unquestionable.”<sup>29</sup>

According to Butler,<sup>30</sup> the classification of human beings into men and women is supported by the heterosexual matrix, which consists of three elements: sex—gender—heterosexual desire. This established matrix is reinforced by the notion of identity as stable, unchangeable, and coherent.<sup>31</sup> The elements of the matrix are actualized through the process of discursive materialization in two combinations: male sex—male sexual practices—woman as the object of sexual desire, and female sex—female sexual practices—man as the object of sexual desire.<sup>32</sup> Subjects who cannot (or do not wish to) fit into the presented pattern or predefined categories are degraded as deviant, and the gender and sexual practices associated with them are considered “unnatural,” illegitimate, and pathological. As Motschenbacher notes, they do not have the status of full subjects,<sup>33</sup> and their experiences in many contexts remain overlooked or pushed into invisibility. That is why, in queer theory, gender and sexual binarism is seen as the “primary symbol of marginalization and stigmatization of non-normative subjects and practices,”<sup>34</sup> as the normative gender system forces individuals to position themselves on one side of the binary divide and marginalizes those who do not meet normative expectations of “gender oppositions.”<sup>35</sup>

Non-conformity to gender norms is an integral part of the existence of queer and gender-nonbinary individuals, but what is considered “normal” behaviour is not given but rather a consequence of the moral order and the set of values

<sup>29</sup> Perger, *Razpiranje horizontov možnega*, 195.

<sup>30</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

<sup>31</sup> Perger, “Med queer teorijami,” 72.

<sup>32</sup> Motschenbacher, *Language, Gender, and Sexual Identity*, 7.

<sup>33</sup> Motschenbacher, 14.

<sup>34</sup> Davis, Zimman, and Raclaw, “Opposites Attract,” 1.

<sup>35</sup> Rusty Barrett, “The Emergence of the Unmarked,” in *Queer Excursions*, ed. Zimman, Davis, and Raclaw, 210.



established in a given society.<sup>36</sup> The concept of “normal” is maintained through the cultural production of the middle class, its hierarchies, and dynamics of power.<sup>37</sup> Within socially constructed boundaries, conventional schemes of association, belonging, and identification<sup>38</sup> are established, allowing social recognition only to individuals with identities that fit within the conventional frameworks of gender.

As Butler points out, even the attribution of gender at birth occurs within a framework that establishes gender within specific classification schemes. When sex is assigned at birth, the way the body is observed is already structured in accordance with the presumption of one of the binary options, i.e. as male or female.<sup>39</sup> Based on these premises, Butler rejects the socially dominant understanding of the biological nature of gender and convincingly argues that gender is a site of interaction between biological and social reality. The distinction between sex and gender, established in the second wave of feminism, discounts the important interactive and dynamic relationship between them by separating biological and social reality. The biological requires the social to be activated, and the social requires the biological to produce its effects.<sup>40</sup> However, the dominant binary schemes on which the binary typology of bodies is based are so deeply rooted in Western societies that they are perceived as a natural fact. The lives of individuals with gender identities that exist outside the binary matrix are thus pushed into invisibility and subjected to misrecognition.

Perger identifies two types of social misrecognition of the manifestation of gender nonbinary identities: (1) the non-binary identity is recognized as existing but not as legitimate (in the process of social recognition, it is filled and covered with negative inscriptions, e.g. it is recognized only as a phase in the development toward a final binary identity); (2) the non-binary identity is neither recognized as legitimate nor as existing but is overlooked and misrecognized as

<sup>36</sup> Jay Stewart, “Academic Theory,” in *Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders*, ed. Christina Richards, Walter Pierre Bouman, and Meg-John Barker (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 59.

<sup>37</sup> J. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 4–6.

<sup>38</sup> Halberstam, 4.

<sup>39</sup> Butler, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2024), 125.

<sup>40</sup> Butler, 116–18.

one of the binary gender categories (male or female)<sup>41</sup> within the binary scheme of perception. Against the backdrop of practices of social misrecognition, the existence of non-binary individuals emerges as an “existence without legitimacy,”<sup>42</sup> which affects both the processes of coming out in various environments and the establishment of different types of relationships.<sup>43</sup>

### Transgender-Inclusive Language as a Resource for Affirming Non-Binary Gender Identities

Socially dominant cisnormative assumptions lead to social misrecognition and direct the attribution of gender based on external appearance. In Slovenian, this is reflected linguistically by referring to gender-nonbinary individuals with the pronoun *on* (he) or *ona* (she) or with male or female morphemes, which “delegitimises linguistic gender diversity.”<sup>44</sup> All the non-binary individuals who participated in the interviews stated that pronouns and gendered morphemes misrepresent them or that their gender identities are not represented in discourse, which reinforces their sense of exclusion. The interviewees also confirmed that there is a dominant social expectation in interactions that they will use gender markers corresponding to the sex assigned at birth.<sup>45</sup>

The results of the survey “Use of the Slovenian language among Transgender Individuals” (“Raba slovenskega jezika pri transspolnih osebah”), which was completed by 35 people, also show that transgender and non-binary individuals perceive Slovenian as exclusionary.<sup>46</sup> When asked, “Do you experience gender dysphoria due to the grammatical gender marking and gender binarism of the Slovenian language?,” only 6 people (20%) responded that they do not experi-

<sup>41</sup> Perger, *Razpiranje horizontov možnega*, 78, 195.

<sup>42</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 241.

<sup>43</sup> Perger, *Razpiranje horizontov možnega*, 206.

<sup>44</sup> Sebastian Cordoba, *Non-Binary Gender Identities: The Language of Becoming* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023), 22.

<sup>45</sup> See Branislava Vičar and Boris Kern, “Raba zaimkov pri spolno nebinarnih osebah,” in *Jezik in književnost v spreminjanju*, ed. Jožica Jožef Beg, Mia Hočevnar, and Neža Kočnik (Ljubljana: Zveza društev Slavistično društvo Slovenije, 2024), 431–32.

<sup>46</sup> 21 respondents (60%) consider Slovenian to be very inclusive, 8 (23%) consider it to be partially inclusive, 3 (9%) consider it to be moderately inclusive, and only one respondent considers it to be inclusive.

ence gender dysphoria, while all other respondents experience some level of gender dysphoria due to (mis)representation in language.

To legitimize their identity in discourse, non-binary individuals seek alternative modes of expression, including the use of the underscore, alternating use of male and female pronouns and morphemes, and the use of gender-neutral language. These options are used depending on the context and circumstances of the interaction.

### ***Underscore***

In Slovenian, the use of the underscore (e.g. *bralke\_ci*, “female readers\_male readers”) proves to be an effective strategy for expressing gender plurality, symbolically replacing all non-existent endings and suffixes for genders that go beyond the binary of either male or female. By being written between the form for feminine and masculine grammatical gender, it symbolically disrupts the hegemonic gender binary and opens up a space for gender plurality. It is recognized as a legitimate means of affirming the authenticity and legitimacy of gender-non-binary individuals or as a dynamic discursive practice that enables these individuals’ social and discursive existence. This practice originates from the “bottom-up,” as it was introduced by nonbinary individuals within the transgender community. From there, the underscore has spread within the LGBTIQ+ community, and in the last eight years it has also entered more general use.<sup>47</sup>

Here are some guidelines for the use of the underscore, which were previously published in several articles in Slovenian and Croatian,<sup>48</sup> but are briefly summarized here for the sake of the completeness of the research.

The underscore is used between forms (nominal, adjectival, or verbal) for feminine and masculine grammatical gender: *študentke\_i* (female and male stu-

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<sup>47</sup> See Nina Perger, “Simbolno nasilje spolnega zaznamovanja v jeziku in prakse upora v visokošolskem prostoru,” *Družboslovne razprave* 32, no. 81 (2016): 41–60; Vičar and Kern, “Možnosti jezikovnega izražanja”; Kern and Vičar, “Jezik in transspolne identitete”; Vičar, “Kvirovsko jezikoslovje.”

<sup>48</sup> Kern and Vičar, “Jezik in transspolne identitete”; Vičar and Kern, “Možnosti jezikovnega izražanja”; Branislava Vičar and Boris Kern, “Pozicioniranje nebinarnosti unutar binarnoga sustava: Primjer slovenskoga jezika,” in *Kritička leksikografija*, ed. Vojko Gorjanc (Belgrade: Biblioteka XX vek, 2024).

dents), *predavateljice\_i* (female and male lecturers), *drage\_i* (dear), *sprejele\_i bomo* (we will confirm). After the underscore, only the variable part of the form is written (e.g. *zdravnice\_ki*, female and male doctors) to simplify the notation. It is recommended to first mention the feminine grammatical form. This helps to avoid the accumulation of underscores in adjectives and verbs by following the principle of agreement in proximity (the form of the word adapts to the closest form of the other word). Thus, adjectives next to the noun are adapted to the first-mentioned feminine form, while the verb forms that follow are in the masculine: “Redne študentke\_i so obiskovali predavanja ob torkih.” (“The regular female and male students attended lectures on Tuesdays.”)

Exceptions include cases where the masculine form is the word formation base for the feminine form or where the masculine form has a zero ending. In such cases, the following options are proposed: *učitelj\_ica* (male teacher\_female teacher), *dekan\_ja* (male dean\_female dean), *odšel\_a je* (they left), *je kompetent\_en\_a* (they are competent).

It makes sense to mention both the full feminine and masculine forms in cases like *sestra\_brat* (sister\_brother) and in multi-word gendered expressions where different bases are used: *srednja medicinska sestra\_srednji zdravstvenik* (female nurse\_male healthcare worker). The full words are sometimes especially used in addressing: *Drage kolegice\_kolegi* (Dear female colleagues\_male colleagues).

The use of the underscore has been discussed in several places, including the Language Counselling Service of the Fran Ramovš Institute of the Slovenian Language. The answer to a user question about the appropriateness of using the underscore in 2019 legitimized its use. However, the response sparked a lively public debate. Since then, the use of underscores has become even more widespread, especially in various cultural and educational institutions. The broader acceptance in mass media was further influenced by the Eurovision victory of a non-binary person and the performance of another non-binary *artist\_ka* (male artist\_female artist) at the same music event. This led even media houses with a more conservative language policy, which previously did not permit the use of underscores, to adopt them in the context of Eurovision reporting.

Given that the underscore is limited to written communication (reading underscores with pauses in between would hinder understanding), it is recommended

for auditory realization of the underscore to read both words or forms without an intervening conjunction *and*, which would suggest only two genders.<sup>49</sup>

It is worth noting that the transgender community shows some variation in the use of the underscore. Some gender-nonbinary individuals, for example, use the underscore after a noun without adding forms for male or female grammatical gender (e.g. *kolegice\_*, female colleagues). As shown by the results of the survey “Use of the Slovenian Language among Transgender Individuals,” not all transgender individuals are equally favourable toward the use of the underscore. The responses in the survey are very diverse, although the majority are supportive of the underscore; 22 people (63%) believe that the underscore is a good solution. Among them, 9 people (26%) find the use of the underscore simple, 8 people (23%) think it is a good solution, although not the simplest, but necessary. Four people (11%) think it is not a good solution because its use is complex. Nine people gave individual responses: four stated that the underscore is a good solution, but they would like a simplification; among them, two people pointed out the issue of pronunciation, and one person stated they would like a non-binary ending to exist. One person said they do not understand the underscore, and four responses expressed aversion to using the underscore. It should be emphasized, however, that the survey took place in 2017, when the use of the underscore was new and some solutions were not yet fully established, so it would be necessary to repeat the survey on the use of gender-inclusive practices.

### ***Pronouns and Gendered Morphemes***

In Slovenian, all pronouns except for the first- and second-person singular pronouns assign binary gender, thereby contributing to the binary social perception of gender. As Enke notes, “gender-marked pronouns establish binary gender as a systemic and cultural mechanism of social order.”<sup>50</sup> The connection between the

<sup>49</sup> Similar strategies for expressing gender non-binarity are being introduced in other languages with grammatical gender. In German, for example, these include the asterisk (*Lehrer\*in*), the underscore (*Schauspieler\_in*), and the colon (*Studienbewerber:in*), and in French the middle dot (*historien-nes*), which is also being implemented in Croatian (*aktivist-kinje*). Particularly in the German linguistic-cultural environment, these practices are becoming part of the language policy of an increasing number of universities; individual universities have developed internal guidelines for trans-inclusive language use.

<sup>50</sup> A. Finn Enke, “Stick Figures and Little Bites: Toward a Nonbinary Pedagogy,” in *Trans Studies: The Challenge to Hetero/Homo Normatives*, ed. Yolanda Martinez-San Miguel and Sarah Tobias (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 219.

pronominal system and the social gender system was also highlighted by the individuals interviewed. One interviewee, when asked about the role they attribute to pronoun usage in reinforcing the binary social perception of gender, responded: “A very high one, because the entire binary world stands on it.” However, individuals with non-binary gender identities turn the limitations of the Slovenian pronominal system into an advantage and, through subversive use of pronouns, seek ways to express their own gender identities. The linguistic practices of the interviewees include the use of pronouns representing the “opposite” gender category and the mixing of male and female pronouns and gendered morphemes.<sup>51</sup>

Individuals who use morphological gender markers that do not correspond to the sex assigned to them at birth (i.e. individuals assigned female at birth using male morphemes, individuals assigned male at birth using female morphemes) reject membership in the gender category assigned to them at birth through the use of gender-marked morphemes and construct an identity that contradicts expected social perceptions. With this linguistic practice, they simultaneously strive, as one interviewee emphasized, to influence the understanding of the role of the grammatical system in constructing gender identities.

Switching between male and female morphemes—a linguistic practice that Bershtling metaphorically refers to as “gender ‘bilingualism’”<sup>52</sup> in their description of such a practice in Hebrew—does not imply acceptance of the binary gender system but rather points to an identity that exists outside or between binary gender categories. This linguistic practice draws attention to the gender binary, thereby denaturalizing it.<sup>53</sup> The interviewees described this practice as a situational necessity arising from their identity positioning outside binary gender categories, on one hand, and the need to communicate with others, on the other. This linguistic practice can also be used as a means to destabilize the gender binary and the assumption of alignment between the sex assigned at birth and

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<sup>51</sup> See also Vičar and Kern “Raba zaimkov,” 433–36. In languages that express grammatical gender only in personal pronouns, such as English and Swedish, gender-neutral pronouns such as the singular *they* in English and the neologism *hen* in Swedish are used as a means of expressing non-binary gender. Both pronouns are included in a dictionary and have passed into common usage.

<sup>52</sup> Orit Bershtling, “‘Speech Creates a Kind of Commitment’: Queering Hebrew,” in *Queer Excursions*, ed. Zimman, Davis, and Raclaw, 46.

<sup>53</sup> Bershtling, 52.

gender identity.<sup>54</sup> The interviewees stated that switching between male and female morphemes is intentional and simultaneously routinized; it does not follow a fixed sequence and can even occur within a single utterance.

### ***Gender-Neutral Language***

The use of language that genders people is so pervasive that it is often present even when gender is irrelevant to the discourse, and gender-neutral options are available (e.g. “person walking a dog” instead of “woman walking a dog”). For non-binary individuals, the use of gender-neutral language is based on finding neutral options for words that are typically gendered (e.g. using the word *parent* instead of *mother* or *father*). Compared to gender-inclusive language, which acknowledges the gender plurality, gender-neutral language involves choosing linguistic means that avoid gender marking. Since the adoption of gender-neutral language allows non-binary individuals to enter the conversation without having to position themselves or others on one of the marked gender positions, Zimman views gender neutrality as an important “resource for affirming non-binary gender identities.”<sup>55</sup>

Some of the most effective tools of gender-neutral language include the use of gender-neutral words (e.g. *oseba*, *vodja*, *raziskovalna skupnost*, *pedagoško osebje*, *strokovni krogi*, *občinstvo*; “person,” “leader,” or collective names such as “research community,” “teaching staff,” “professional circles,” and “audience”); noun phrases with a left adjectival modifier instead of noun phrases with a right noun modifier (e.g. *študentska skupnost*, “student community”); nominalized forms (e.g. *sestaneč bo v torek*, “the meeting will be held on Tuesday”); impersonal sentences (e.g. *z raziskavo je bilo ugotovljeno*, “the study found”); present tense for expressing the future (e.g. *jutri nadaljujemo*, “we continue tomorrow”); and omitting gendered nouns or pronouns when they are not necessary.

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### **Conclusion**

The emergence of transgender and non-binary individuals on the social map has brought discussions about language to the forefront of transgender issues and expanded the concept of gender-inclusive language with a transgender per-

<sup>54</sup> Bershtling, 51.

<sup>55</sup> Zimman, “Pronouns and Possibilities,” 180.

spective. The linguistic experience of individuals with non-binary gender identities depends on how they are addressed in interaction and which words and morphemes are used to refer to them. In interactions with non-binary individuals, the choice of linguistic means can either affirm and validate their gender identities or delegitimize them. Therefore, understanding identity as an intersubjective phenomenon, meaning that identities are never constructed alone but always in interaction with others, is essential for affirming the identities of non-binary individuals.

Strategies for transgender-inclusive language are often met with reluctance, disapproval, and even outright rejection by professionals and the general public. However, it is important to recognize that the binary normative framework is at the core of shaping the perception of genders and transgender-inclusive strategies. As Zimman notes, a particular linguistic solution may sound “less elegant precisely *because* it challenges social and linguistic norms.”<sup>56</sup>

As transgender and non-binary individuals develop linguistic strategies to affirm their identities, they subvert cisnormativity and the gender binary, while also loosening the socially dominant frameworks of gender perception. As speakers, we can choose pronouns and gendered morphemes in line with the social perception trapped in the binary gender matrix, or we can allow the person we are speaking about to “exert some agency over how they are spoken about.” Expanding our options beyond the gender binary opens up space for our political imagination and allows us “to envision the kinds of changes we need to make life liveable.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Zimman, 180.

<sup>57</sup> Paisley Currah, *Sex Is as Sex Does: Governing Transgender Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2022), 151.



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