
**Read this realness: How non-binary people are taking up and subverting cultural and linguistic spaces in French.**

**What this research was about and why it is important**

Many languages, including French, have traditionally had a grammatical structure in which nouns are said to be either grammatically “masculine” or grammatically “feminine.” Although grammatical gender is not the same as social gender, we often use so-called masculine and feminine language forms to gesture toward social gender. For example, we use pronouns like he, she, they, xie, and others either for or in spite of the connotations each has in terms of social gender. In addition to pronouns, many verbs and articles are also marked in this way in French. In order to say almost anything in French, you have to engage with grammatical gender. As understandings of social gender continue to evolve, speakers of French who are non-binary are subverting and adapting this grammatically binary language to re-shape French so that it can better describe their experiences of being gendered in the world. There are a number of studies that explore this linguistic evolution, however, most of these studies do not adequately engage with the actual lives of non-binary people. This study focuses on how non-binary people experience being positioned in these cultural and linguistic landscapes. It asks: How do non-binary speakers of French use language to position themselves? What, if any, linguistic and/or cultural movements get mentioned? In what ways does this self-positioning look like or contrast with broader conversations about non-binary people in Canada and in France? Better understanding the actual, linguistically and culturally situated, lives of non-binary Francophones is critical to being able to teach both *to* and *about* non-binary people in the context of language classrooms.

**What the researchers did**

- 80 adults who speak French as a first language and who are non-binary took a survey with 51 questions.
- Most, though not all, participants were either from or presently resided in either France or Canada.
- Participants shared the language forms they used for themselves and those they had heard used by others via several open-ended questions and by rating several quantitative statements. Some of these questions did explicitly ask about language forms, while many did not.
- This gave the researcher multiple data points to analyze: 1) counts of how often participants used particular forms to describe themselves, 2) robust samples of actual linguistic and cultural self-positioning by each participant, 3) comprehension ratings of various forms, and 4) open-ended reactions to various forms.
- The researcher used all of these data points together to determine what themes and strategies participants brought up, both in terms of language and culture, when discussing their own positionalities.

**What the researchers found**

- The ways that non-binary speakers of French use language and cultural references often vary.
- However, common themes include: a struggle for linguistic autonomy (i.e. the right and power to use language in ways that work for oneself as a speaker as opposed to deference to so-called language authorities), self-definition, and cultural readability.
- Participants in this study also often made reference to broader cultural or linguistic movements when positioning themselves linguistically and culturally. These included but were not limited to references to inclusive writing movements and the institutionalization of language forms.
- The relationship between participants and linguistic, legal, and medical authorities was also discussed and juxtaposed against self-knowledge and lived experiences.

**Things to consider**

- Centering the voices of non-binary Francophones creates space for a deeper understanding of the broader social movements for the recognition of non-binary lives in Francophone contexts such as Canada and France.
- Continued inquiry is needed, but understanding the actual lives of non-binary speakers of French is critically important to being able to teach both *to* and *about* non-binary people in French language classrooms.

**Material, data, open access access:** N/A

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