Binarism grammatical lacuna

The impacts of grammar on non-binary people

How does the way a language works – its grammar – affect how we think about ourselves and other people?

That’s the question behind a new study by Spanish philosopher Carla Carmona from the University of Seville. Her research areas include social epistemology, embodied cognition, and intercultural understanding. These ideas come together in a recently published paper on the relationship between language and gender binarism – the belief that gender can be divided into two distinct categories of male and female.

Carmona argues that the effect of the gender gap in a language’s grammar is harmful because it constrains and discredits non-binary people. She explores what she has termed ‘binarism grammatical lacuna’ (BGL), which occurs when the grammar of a language forces non-binary sex and gender identities to choose particular pronouns or other grammatical devices. Just as particular pronouns or other gender-based grammar, most do. Even if a teacher is unprejudiced, they might fail to notice that a student uses gender-neutral forms to identify themselves.

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Types of Injustice

Besides the gap in the collective pool of hermeneutical resources, drawing from other contributors to the literature on epistemic injustice, Carmona identifies four kinds of epistemic injustices associated with the complex phenomenon of binarism grammatical lacuna.

Contributory injustice occurs when non-binary people are not allowed to contribute to the collective pool of hermeneutical resources with the hermeneutical devices that they have developed to make sense of their experiences, because either individuals or institutions, or both, are ‘willfully ignorant’ of the impact that their binary gender perspective has on a non-binary person. For example, even if a teacher is unprejudiced, they might fail to notice that a student uses gender-neutral ‘ey’ in a political speech during the 2021 Madrid elections.

Carmona argues that the effect of the gender gap in a language’s grammar is to constrain and discrediting non-binary people’s communicative agency. She explains, ‘A grammar in which non-binary people can only choose between being “he” or “she” could be oppressive because their sex and gender statuses are not considered as possibilities in the very language they speak.’

Pragmatic competence injustice is related to perceived grammatical incompetence.

Failure to adopt gender neutral language is a prejudice which has a detrimental effect on a non-binary person’s wellbeing.

GENDER GAPS AND EFFECTS

Carmona defines the gender gap in a language – BGL – as what happens when the grammar of a language forces a non-binary person to choose between male and female grammatical forms when talking about themselves. Language is a reflection of social reality, and the gap arises because of a socially enforced ideology about gender in which identity is assumed to be a binary choice.

It is not known how many people identify as non-binary and are affected by these issues. Non-binary identities include, but are not limited to, non-binary transgender and intersex individuals, people who don’t identify with any gender, as well as those who identify with another gender or more than one.

In addition, mainstream language users might consider gender-neutral language to be grammatically disadvantage and can lead to their ability being questioned, as well as the validity of what they say. The problem is even greater in languages like Spanish which forces users to disclose their gender even more than in English. Attempts to change the Spanish language, for example using a gender-neutral ‘el’ at the end of nouns instead of the usual masculine ‘o’ and feminine ‘a’, have largely been resisted by the majority community. Recently, Spain’s Equality Minister Irene Montero was ridiculed for using gender-neutral ‘el’ in a political speech during the 2021 Madrid elections.

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For example, a non-binary speaker might have developed their own grammatical tools to avoid being misunderstood by someone who is expected to be unaware of or resistant to non-binary grammar. In this regard, non-binary people often feel that sharing epistemic materials concerning their non-binarism is risky and unsafe for them. As a result, when meeting someone they expect to be unaware of, or resistant to, non-gendered language, they have to choose between being true to themselves or intelligible to others. This may reduce the risk of non-binary uses of grammar as implicit testimony regarding the existence of non-binary identities. By using ‘they’ to refer to themself, a non-binary person is making a statement regarding their own identity. If, in turn, one does not use non-binary grammar to refer to them, whether institutionally or agentially, one devalues such pieces of testimony. This adds to a systematic discrimination against non-binary people as givers of knowledge concerning their own sex and gender.

Testimonial smothering in the context of BGL happens when non-binary people who have developed their own grammatical tools use canonical grammar to avoid being misunderstood by someone who is expected to be unaware of or resistant to non-binary grammar. In this regard, non-binary people often feel that sharing epistemic materials concerning their non-binarism is risky and unsafe for them. As a result, when meeting someone they expect to be unaware of, or resistant to, non-gendered language, they have to choose between being true to themselves or intelligible to others. This may reduce the risk of non-binary uses of grammar as implicit testimony regarding the existence of non-binary identities. By using ‘they’ to refer to themself, a non-binary person is making a statement regarding their own identity. If, in turn, one does not use non-binary grammar to refer to them, whether institutionally or agentially, one devalues such pieces of testimony. This adds to a systematic discrimination against non-binary people as givers of knowledge concerning their own sex and gender.

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