

# Binarism grammatical lacuna

## The impacts of grammar on non-binary people

Social injustices associated with gender are becoming more disruptive and attracting particular attention. In her new paper, Carla Carmona from the University of Seville in Spain looks at the relationship between language and binary ideology and how a language's grammar can further marginalise 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 the launch of #BlackLivesMatter in 2013 was a tipping point for the visibility of racial injustice, Carmona argues that #Non-binaryLivesMatter too.

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 explains that, although some languages like Finnish do not have a gender-based grammar, most do. Even if they use gender in different ways, most languages assume that gender is a binary choice between male and female. For example, German, Spanish, French, and Italian assign a male or female gender to nouns and pronouns, and in Arabic and Hindi, verbs also indicate gender.

Despite these complexities and the fact that some cultures are less sensitive to gender issues than others, the use of gender-neutral language is increasing. This is in response to growing awareness of gender in society and the debunking of assumptions that gender is a binary choice. For example, English allows the possibility of 'they' as a gender-neutral alternative to 'he' or 'she'. For the same purpose, Swedish has coined the new word 'hen', and in Spain the adoption of 'elle' is gaining ground.

But, as Carmona highlights, gender-neutral language is far from being accepted by all sectors of society. Those who adopt it for themselves, as well as those who use it to refer to others, are often discredited and sometimes ridiculed, not least in politics and the popular media. This can lead to

the further marginalisation of non-binary people and those who support them.

In short, not having the language to describe their identity denies non-binary people the means to fully express themselves. As Carmona argues, this gender gap or 'grammatical lacuna' in language denies non-binary people access to the 'hermeneutical resources' – the words, grammar, concepts, shared by a community to make sense of the world – needed to achieve recognition in society. Labelling the phenomenon as 'binarism grammatical lacuna' (BGL), Carmona finds that this results in multiple kinds of 'epistemic injustices', that is, injustices related to knowledge which are committed against people as subjects of knowledge. In this regard, Carmona builds on the work of British philosopher Miranda Fricker, who distinguishes between 'testimonial injustices' (by means of which people are discriminated against as givers and receivers of knowledge) and 'hermeneutical injustices' (injustices associated with how people interpret and communicate about their lives).

### GENDER GAPS AND EFFECTS

Carmona defines the gender gap in 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.



Gender-neutral forms are beginning to be accepted but mainstream language users might consider them to be ungrammatical, and the practice still remains rare.

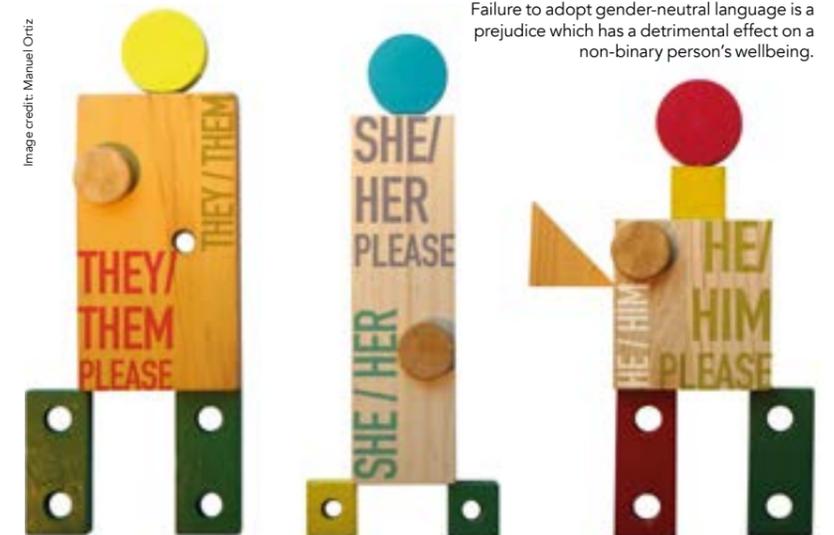
## Ignorance is no defence – governments, educators and health professionals all have a role in modelling appropriate and inclusive linguistic behaviour.

Fighting binarism demands different strategies in different languages, and although gender-neutral forms are beginning to be accepted, many problems remain. For example, the practice is still rare, and inclusive language isn't always understood or shared by the majority community. Lack of uptake may be due to people's laziness, ignorance, or unwillingness to change their way of thinking. Most often, failure to adopt gender-neutral language amounts to prejudice, which has a detrimental effect on the non-binary person's sense of self and overall wellbeing.

In addition, mainstream language users might consider gender-neutral language to be ungrammatical, for example when 'they' in English is used to refer to a singular person, especially in a formal context. This puts non-binary people at a grammatical 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 'e' 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 'e' in a political speech during the 2021 Madrid elections.

Carmona argues that the effect of the gender gap in a language's grammar is



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

to constrain and compromise 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.'

### 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 'wilfully ignorant' of the impact that their binary gender perspective and ideology has on a non-binary person. For example, even if a teacher is unprejudiced, they might fail to notice that a student uses non-binary grammar to identify themselves. Not giving the right uptake to the student who contributes by using their preferred grammatical tools is harmful because it marginalises their knowledge.

Pragmatic competence injustice is related to perceived grammatical competence.





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For example, a non-binary speaker might have the grammatical tools to communicate as they wish, but they are perceived by others to be incompetent because their tools are different from the norm. Carmona argues that this can 'undermine non-binary grammar users' self-trust' and result in them feeling misunderstood. They may also stop using their preferred grammar.

Testimonial injustice occurs when one's testimony is not granted the credibility it deserves. As regards BGL, Carmona explains that one could also understand

people who have developed their own grammatical tools use canonical grammar to avoid being misunderstood by someone who is expected to be unaware or resistant to give uptake 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

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non-binary uses of grammar as implicit testimony regarding the existence of non-binary identities. By using 'they' to refer to themselves, 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

confrontation, but it can also lead to them not expressing themselves as they need and therefore being silenced.

### MISFIRERS

Carmona applies another concept that is important to understanding the injustices experienced by non-binary people as a result of a language's grammar. Identified by Hilke Hänel, 'hermeneutical misfiring' takes place when a non-marginalised person uses the wrong language to explain a marginalised person's experience. This is about the responsibility that privileged groups have

to ensure they speak appropriately and use non-binary grammatical devices correctly. Carmona argues that this is particularly relevant in education and healthcare settings, and that the state also has a responsibility 'to sensitise citizens to non-binary identities and non-binary grammatical devices'.

### RELATED RESEARCH: TESTIMONIAL VOID

In a different paper, Carmona identifies another form of epistemic injustice, which she has named 'testimonial void'. Testimonial void occurs when a speaker withholds information from someone because they make the incorrect assumption that that person is unable to understand it or act on it owing to prejudice or another epistemic vice. Making assumptions about another person's capacity for knowledge is an indirect but extreme form of silencing that demonstrates the inequality of the relationship. Carmona explains that this is a lose-lose scenario: not only is someone prevented from participating in the potential exchange, the instigator misses out on what they might have said.

### TIME OF FRICTION

We are living in what Carmona describes as a 'time of friction' for gender identity, and the relationship between binary ideology and language is a new and important study area.

By examining non-binary experience through the lens of language and grammar, Carmona highlights the injustices that can arise. The primary harms of these injustices are the loss of selfhood for the individual, and the further marginalisation of non-binary minority communities.

As for the privileged majority, ignorance is no defence, and governments, educators, and health professionals all have a role in modelling appropriate and inclusive linguistic behaviour. As Carmona argues, language and social practice are intertwined. Binarism ignores the social reality of the range of identities that non-binary people present and its influence is harmful and pervasive. There is another call to fight social injustice: #Non-binaryLivesMatter too.



# Behind the Research

## Dr Carla Carmona

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### Research Objectives

Dr Carla Carmona studied the relationship between language and binary ideology and investigated how a language's grammar contributes to the marginalisation of non-binary people.

### Detail

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#### Bio

Carla Carmona teaches theory of dialogue and interculturality, East Asian aesthetics and epistemology, at the University of Seville, Spain. She has specialised in social epistemology and the philosophy of Wittgenstein. She currently develops her artistic practice under the name of OIC. Her pronouns are she/her or they/them.

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### Personal Response

**Please tell us more about the phenomenon that you have identified as 'testimonial void'.**

My research on testimonial void is motivated by the insight that under normal circumstances we have a responsibility to share what we know. Testimonial void is the sort of phenomenon behind inner thoughts such as 'Why bother telling her? She won't know what to do with that piece of information'. Women have often been subjected to this kind of injustice. During my childhood and adolescence in the Spain of the 1980s and the 90s, I often realized that I was not told about certain things, which included sports, politics, or the world of science and technology, by the males around me, whether they were fellow classmates, relatives, or other acquaintances, including teachers. There are plenty of examples of testimonial void in cinema. In Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*, women are not told about the family business by the men of the Corleone family. Likewise, when women make wrong assumptions, they are not corrected, in such a way that they are kept in the dark on purpose. This kind of practice has silenced women. For example, by restricting women's education to domestic life, the Franco regime structurally neglected women as first-class knowers and kept them away from sharing their mind on affairs concerning the public sphere.

