

Binary-constrained code-switching among non-binary French-English bilinguals

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Abstract. This paper presents data on non-binary French-English bilinguals' metalinguistic analyses of their code-switching behavior in discussing their gender identities. Six non-binary French-English bilinguals were recruited for sociolinguistic interviews via Montréal-based LGBT+ organizations and asked about their experiences using non-binary French and English, especially how they describe themselves in each language. Participants' preferences for using English to describe issues of gender identity reveals a particular type of topic-based code-switching is utilized in this community—a novel phenomenon that I have deemed *Binary-Constrained Code-Switching*, where participants switch out of an L1 (French) into an L2 (English) because they perceive their L1 as lacking the appropriate lexicon or grammatical features, specifically non-binary pronouns and gender agreement markers, to index their gender identities. In parallel to their dispreference for using French to describe their gender identities, participants' preference for using English correlated with their perceptions of English as a more gender-neutral language than French, as well as a language with more linguistic resources—chiefly, vocabulary—to describe LGBT+ identities (c.f. *queer*). The data presented here not only supplement the primarily binary gender models found in extant studies of socially-motivated code-switching, but also provide greater evidence for the perceptual link between grammatical gender and social gender.

Keywords. grammatical gender; code-switching; non-binary French; neutral French; binary-constrained code-switching

1. Introduction. Though scholars have addressed the morphological innovations of non-binary French (Alpheratz 2018; Ashley 2019; Knisely 2020; Kaplan 2022), code-switching behaviors among non-binary French bilinguals have yet to be investigated. Code-switching has long been a survival mechanism within queer communities, with gay men using the Polari argot to elicit sexual encounters while evading police detection (Baker 2002), while gender non-conforming communities have developed their own codes to fully express their identities (Rojas-Berscia 2016).

While topic-based code-switching has been documented within queer communities—with Vriesendorp and Rutten (2017) finding that gay Dutch-English bilinguals use English to index 'cool,' non-heteronormative identities—my analysis of topic-based code-switching among non-binary French-English bilinguals uncovers the first known instances of what I refer to as *binary-constrained code-switching*, where participants switch out of an L1 (French) into an L2 (English) because they perceive their L1 as lacking the relevant grammatical features, specifically non-binary pronouns and gender markers, to describe their own (gender) identities. Although *translanguaging* broadly encompasses the multidimensional identities speakers evoke during

* This research was supported by the Tow Summer Research Fellowship through Barnard College. I would like to thank my study participants. I would also like to thank Laurie Postlewate (Barnard College), Emily Sun (Barnard College), and my audience at LSA 2022 for their feedback at various stages of this project. Author: Jennifer Kaplan, University of California, Berkeley (jenniferkaplan@berkeley.edu).

code-switches (Wei 2011), I document a more nuanced subset of identity-constrained switches motivated by speaker awareness of the connection between *grammatical gender* and *human (social) gender* in both codes.

This paper begins with a general overview of where gender is marked in French, as well as how non-binary French offers alternatives to binary morphological gender-marking systems. The overview of prior literature also introduces the concept of translanguaging, and how it has been used to investigate code-switching among queer communities. In section three, I describe the methods used for conducting the study at hand. Section four describes the translanguaging practices documented among the participants, as well as participants' metalinguistic analyses of these practices. The final section describes the relevance of these findings, including a conclusion highlighting their broader impacts for both the study of language practices among non-binary and trans communities and the study of the connections between social and grammatical gender more broadly.

2. Background. I begin with an introduction to gender in French, followed by an explanation of the relationship between code-switching and translanguaging, as well as how these phenomena can be used to explore how individuals' multilingual linguistic performances can express core aspects of their identity, including gender.

2.1. GENDER IN FRENCH. French is a morphological gender language wherein each noun and its associated modifiers are marked as masculine or feminine. Traditional analyses of morphological gender in language have viewed gender as a type of case-marking, wherein morphological gender is arbitrary and mostly separate from semantic gender (i.e., human gender) (Corbett 1991). The exception to this arbitrary assignment in the Romance languages is in the gender-marking of animate referents, whereby nouns referring to men are generally masculine and nouns referring to women are generally feminine (Loporcaro 2018). However, psycholinguistic studies have repeatedly countered the notion that morphological gender and social gender are not connected, as when Gygas and Gabriel (2008) found that French structures using the generic masculine were interpreted as underlyingly referring to only men; even when reminded that the generic masculine can encompass women referents, it was more difficult for participants to link generic masculine forms with women referents (Gygas 2012).

Queer, trans, non-binary, and gender-nonconforming individuals have further highlighted the ways in which the binary morphological gender system facilitates misgendering. The desire to avoid misgendering oneself or others through use of masculine or feminine markers that do not correspond with an individual's social gender has led to the innovation of neutral (Divergenres 2021) or non-binary morphological gender markers (Alpheratz 2018; Ashley 2019; de Villeneuve & Gheeraert 2018). These morphological innovations co-exist alongside non-binary neo-pronouns, with the two most popular ones being *iel* and *ille* (Knisely 2020; La Vie en Queer 2018). When *non-binary French* is discussed in this paper, it is specifically in reference to these neo-pronoun and neo-marking systems.

2.2. CODE-SWITCHING, TRANSLANGUAGING, AND QUEER IDENTITIES. Much has been written about the phenomenon of *code-switching*, or "the seemingly random alternation of two languages both between and within sentences" (Poplack 1980: 581), though this definition has been reinterpreted by different scholars. However, all scholars agree that code-switching requires competency in at least two languages. Most of the extant literature on North American code-switching focuses on Spanish-English bilinguals (e.g. Poplack 1980; Smead 1998), with comparatively fewer studies examining French-English bilinguals. More recently, Wei (2011: 1222) discussed the

phenomenon of *translanguaging*, defined as “going between different linguistic structures and systems and going beyond them.” This definition encompasses what has traditionally been called code-switching, but also goes beyond it in important ways. Most importantly for the study at hand, studies of translanguaging must account for the ways speakers present “different identities to different people in different contexts through their multilingual practices” (Wei 2011: 1232).

At issue in the study at hand is the specific codes that multilingual individuals use to signal (or not signal) aspects of their gender identities. Topic-based code-switching is well-documented, as is code-switching related to social identity, with Gal’s (1978) study of German–Hungarian bilinguals being perhaps the most famous example of gender roles influencing the choice to use one language versus another. However, there are comparatively fewer studies looking specifically at topic-based code-switching and queer identity. One of the few studies on this particular topic is Vriesendorp and Rutten’s (2017), which found that, among Dutch-English bilinguals, switches into English indexed a “gay-celebratory, non-heteronormative identity” (66). This study provides precedence for the idea that bilingual individuals may utilize one of the codes they have access to in order to index a particular aspect of their queer identity, which is further explored in the present study of French-English bilinguals.

3. Methods. All data was collected through structured sociolinguistic interviews with six self-identified non-binary French-English bilinguals living in Montréal, Québec, Canada in summer 2018. Participants were recruited via outreach with LGBTQ+ organizations in Montréal, including the distribution of a recruitment flyer describing the study as seeking L1 Francophones who were non-binary and between the ages of 18-24, which was shared via email listservs and posted on social media. All participants have French as their L1 with varying degrees of English bilingualism, ranging from early bilinguals to those who gained English fluency during secondary school. Five of the six participants lived in Québec from early childhood, while one participant was a visiting student from France. All participants were White, which is a limitation; future studies will include more diverse subject pools. **Table 1** provides important background information about participants, including approximate age of English acquisition and the percent of time they self-described using French versus English in their daily lives.

Participant	L1	L2	L3	Approx. Age of English Acquisition	% French	% English	%Spanish
Noe	French	English	—	<12	90%	10%	—
Juneau	French	Spanish	English	17	90%	8%	2%
Rose	French	English	—	12	90%	10%	—
Chandler	French	English	—	<12	66%	33%	—
Bardot	French	English	—	— ¹	33%	66%	—
Gabrielle	French	English	—	—	20%	80%	—

Table 1. Table showing participants alongside their self-described language usage.

Interviews probed participants’ metapragmatic analyses of non-binary French as well as self-reported usage patterns (i.e., in what contexts participants use non-binary French, standard

¹ Data on age of English acquisition is missing for both Bardot and Gabrielle, as age of acquisition was not initially collected from participants, but rather came up as a spontaneous topic in most interviews.

French, and English). Interviews switched between English and French according to participant preference.

4. Results. In discussing gender identity and language use in French and English, three salient themes emerge. The first centers around the difficulty participants experience in using non-binary French with interlocutors, which stems primarily from a lack of linguistic resources as well as attitudinal barriers to the adoption of a new variety (namely, non-binary French), which range from ignorance to outright hostility. However, despite these challenges, participants still emphasized the gender-affirmation they experienced when using non-binary French. Though participants are not often able to use non-binary French for reasons described chiefly in §4.1, its function as a site of linguistic gender affirmation reveals that non-binary French, as a code separate from standard French, represents linguistic liberation. The final theme was a comparatively more positive attitude toward the linguistic features of English when it comes to describing gender identity, which included the perceived neutrality of the English language (due to its lack of morphological gender), as well as a perceived larger vocabulary for describing LGBT+ related issues, which participants lamented that French lacked. Both of these themes explain the combination of social factors and metalinguistic attitudes underlying participants' preference for using English to discuss their gender identities, as opposed to French—hence, binary-constrained code-switching.

4.1. FRENCH IS DIFFICULT TO USE TO DESCRIBE NON-BINARY GENDER IDENTITIES, OR REFERENCE NON-BINARY INDIVIDUALS. Among interviewees, there was the consistent impression that French is more difficult to use than English in conversations pertaining to gender identity, or when referring to non-binary individuals. The main factors contributing to this perceived difficulty included the lack of resources on gender and sexuality available in French, the lack of resources on non-binary or neutral French, and the stigma against non-binary French perpetuated in part because of the association between non-binary language in general and anglophone culture.

Participants' laments about the lack of French-language resources on gender and sexuality frequently referenced their experiences in the francophone educational system of Québec province. Throughout Québec, the educational system is split based on language of instruction. Thus, in addition to the differences between individual districts and schools that exist everywhere, there is also a salient cultural difference between francophone schools and anglophone schools that extends from primary education all the way up through the university system. Juneau, who described their childhood growing up in "a little rural village... with forests and cows" in Québec province, described how this cultural-linguistic split extends into sex-ed. As they understand it, individuals raised in the francophone educational system—of which they were a part—have less access to terms to describe gender and sexuality, which means that many raised in the francophone system "don't even know the difference between... sex assigned at birth, gender, and sexuality." They perceive the French educational system as slower to adapt to changing social norms, especially vocabulary around gender issues, "because it's pretty new in history, that's why it's more difficult to talk about non-binary issues cuz Francophones communities... they wasn't [sic] there. It's not teach [sic] in public—nowhere in public education. It's just not a word that we have, nowhere." This comparative lack of education isn't resolved in adulthood; in fact, it persists in post-secondary education, where Gabrielle—a current graduate student at an anglophone institution—insists that francophone universities are "TERF [trans-exclusive radical feminist]-y and white," which feeds into ongoing hostility toward trans and non-binary students. Juneau seconds this notion, explaining that "francophones" are about

“ten years, maybe more” behind “the anglophone community is in terms of gender, gender comprehension.” Once again, Juneau relates this back to institutional differences in the francophone educational and cultural spheres:

Juneau: Because of this issue of access of knowledge. It's less difficult for an anglophone to use *they/them* because it's a word that already exists in their language. Uh, that creating a new pronoun does not recognize [sic] in French. Because in English, you have to change the, the, the way you use the word and in French you have to learn a new [word].

As Juneau's last sentence reveals, the general cultural split regarding discussions of gender and sexuality feeds into a more specific barrier to the adoption of non-binary and gender-inclusive language in French. The fact that many of the terms used to describe gender and sexuality studies today gained serious traction in English-speaking universities in the mid-20th century (Perreau 2017) has led to many of these terms being either calqued from English, or not translated at all (c.f. *queer*). This trend carries over into language used to specifically describe non-binary individuals, with the added linguistic caveat that, while singular neutral *they* has been used to refer to referents whose gender was unknown or irrelevant for centuries, no equivalent third-person singular neutral pronoun exists in standard French. Thus, an additional linguistic barrier: The pronouns used to hail or describe a non-binary individual at the most elementary conversational level don't “already exist in their language”—French.

As indicated by Juneau's explanation, there also exists a French lexical gap in pronouns, gender agreement markers, and lexical items (e.g., kinship terms) that can be used to refer to non-binary referents. Though non-binary French grammars and linguistic guides (e.g., Alpheratz 2018) *do* exist, another common theme espoused by participants was the difficulty they had in finding such resources, either for their own use or to educate others. When conversing with a monolingual French audience, Chandler explains “we cannot even share something, share some information or resources if they're not available in French,” as “if you can't find information on it in French, French speaking Québécois will most likely not want to inform themselves on it... it's going to be harder to accept.” Juneau echoes this sentiment in claiming that “there's a big, big, big issue about knowledge, transmission and creation of [pause] proper vocabulary around non-binary realities in French.”

Compared to the French case, there are more resources on non-binary English, especially non-binary English pronouns. This imbalance in linguistic resources led to many participants learning (and using) English non-binary forms before French non-binary forms. Chandler's case is representative of this phenomenon in that, despite being an L1 French speaker, they started using non-binary pronouns (*they/them*) in English one year before discovering the existence of non-binary pronouns in French, a delay which they explain was due to the fact that they “did not know about those [French] pronouns.” However, in the year before they discovered (and came to use) non-binary French pronouns, the lexical gap in terms for non-binary referents in English versus French caused them discomfort:

Chandler: I was frustrated that it didn't exist in French... But yeah, I spent a year being discontent because it doesn't exist, but is still needed. And... yeah that's also at that time that I started using, well that I started to speak about myself, using always the masculine form, and that I started asking some people close to me to do so as well. Um...But yeah, um. It—using masculine for nouns in French helped in the way that I am very often

perceived as a woman, so it would kind of counterbalance it. I felt like a part of me that was always, well, forgotten that people couldn't see was finally seen. But it's not...It's not perfect either. It's better, but...that's, that's not really it, either.

Chandler's description of their early experiences searching for gender-affirming French language is rife with negative emotional valences: They were "frustrated" and "discontent" about the lack of vocabulary to describe their gender identity in French, which further fed into feelings of invisibilization, about being "forgotten" and "unseen." In an attempt to "counterbalance" the invisibilization of their non-binary identity that occurred when they are "perceived as a woman," they began using "masculine" agreements in French. But this strategy, which inherently relies on binary language, is "not perfect" because it doesn't reflect Chandler's actual, non-binary gender—thus, their insistence that non-binary French "is still needed." Even after learning about the existence of non-binary pronouns such as *iel* and *ille*, they became frustrated by the way that non-binary French is disregarded:

Chandler: And I mean, [non-binary French] exists, but it's not...[long pause] It's harder to take seriously. Not necessarily for me, but in general, since it's really something we invented... And I know that there are some neutral pronouns in English, other than *they*, like I think um, *zie* [zi] or... other such pronouns. And I feel like...um these pronouns are perceived, kind of in the same way as all neutral pronouns in French, that you don't really need them because they don't exist.

As Chandler notes, it is the precise *newness* of non-binary terms that has led to stigma against them, as they are "invented"—that is, perceived as *artificially created* (in this case, to fill a lexical gap), rather than evolving from other, often slower processes of language change. Of course, it's worth noting that most linguistic features are, in a sense, 'invented,' as when neologisms are coined to describe new technologies. Some of the specific reticence toward new terms in francophone-specific. Cultural attitudes toward the French language in France and Québec maintain a strong link between cultural identity and linguistic identity, which has historically resulted in strong attitudes toward linguistic purity in both regions; such attitudes create a strong sense of hostility toward neologisms ('invented' language, in Chandler's terms), especially those perceived to come from anglophone influence (anglicisms) (Walsh 2014, 2016).

Chandler's comparison of non-binary French pronouns with English singular *they* also reveals the ways in which English terminology serves as a comparison point for French. For Chandler, the integration of English singular neutral *they* into public consciousness is the benchmark against which non-binary French pronouns should be measured. And by this self-imposed standard, non-binary French pronouns are inadequate; though singular *they* received pushback for several decades by prescriptivists (MacKay 1983), in recent years it has seen widespread acceptance from mainstream media, culminating with dictionary Merriam-Webster's selection of singular *they* as the 'Word of the Year' in 2019 (Merriam-Webster 2019). While it is true that since the time of our interview, in parallel to the anglophone case, the esteemed French dictionary *Le Robert* officially created an entry for the neutral pronoun *iel*, such isolated moments of recognition do not overshadow the cultural backlash that French neo-pronouns continue to receive (e.g. Le Monde 2021). Referring back to Chandler's quote, they make the connection between the contemporary reaction to French neo-pronouns in Canada and the current status of English neo-pronoun *zie*, which, though not all that new anymore, has since been usurped by now-ubiquitous singular *they*: "you don't really need them because they don't exist." And yet, as Chandler's discussion of the entanglement between their changing gender

identity and their shifting language usage reveals, these pronouns *are* needed because the gender identities which they semantically encode *do exist*.

More so than pronouns, non-binary gender agreement markers represent a more morphologically embedded method of integrating non-binary grammatical gender into French. However the complexities of the French morphological gender system have created a number of obstacles in the creation of non-binary agreement markers (see Kaplan 2022 for an overview). The well-discussed difficulties in either removing gender-marking from French, or embedding non-binary French within a system of neo-gender markers (e.g. Alpheratz 2018) has additionally resulted in an abundance of different systems of non-binary French, which in turn has increased the perceived complexity of non-binary French.

Chandler’s metalinguistic analyses of how they describe themselves in French versus in English provide an illustrative narrative of this phenomenon. In addition to hesitating in using non-binary French pronouns, they were also intimidated by what they perceived as the complexity of non-binary French agreement markers: “I too thought [using non-binary French] would be complicated.” They elaborate that this is an attitude that they have consistently encountered when people express resistance to using non-binary French:

Chandler: Um [pause] but I feel like [um] what people dislike about the idea [of non-binary French] is that it's brand new. And that's complicated, to add something that is completely new to the way you speak. And yeah, so the effort that you have to make, and you have to change something you've been doing a specific way, your whole life, It's like telling someone to walk differently, or else someone will feel uncomfortable. You might feel a bit attacked by that. So I think people kind of take it [pause] personal [hesitatingly], if they're not familiar with the concept already.

Learning non-binary French forms—especially new agreement systems—involves a significant learning curve. In Chandler’s words, “it’s like telling someone to walk differently.” Bardot echoes the sentiment that the complexity of non-binary French contributes to a steep learning curve, even for non-binary Francophones personally invested in adopting new grammatical systems: “it's complicated which is the reason why I'm trying [out], like, understanding it very well for myself.” Juneau elaborates on the way that the morphological gender system of French makes using non-binary variants difficult:

Juneau: Like in French, everything [...] Every [pause] F-word is gendered, like a table, a chair. Everything related to [...] fashion. So that's why I switch because [pause] it's very difficult in n- all gender language, to just find ways that you're using in a way that is non-gendered. Sometimes it just...it doesn't exist [rising intonation], or it's not fluent [rising intonation]. So, yeah, I mean, people just switch. I do it for myself.

It is interesting to note that Juneau’s complaint centers on the general grammatical gender system of French, which marks nouns and their modifiers; however, the issue of misalignment between grammatical gender and social (human) gender is only relevant on animate nouns, especially those referring to people. Nonetheless, their frustration at the ubiquity of morphological gender within the French language (an “all gender language”) has concrete consequences: Rather than utilize neo-markers associated with non-binary or neutral French systems, they instead opt to “switch” between masculine and feminine gender-marking when referring to themselves. Thus, Juneau disrupts normative expectations not by using neo-markers, but rather by using linguistic resources already present within standard French in a novel way.

Further, the comparative accessibility of non-binary English has led to the perception that non-binary language *in general* is an Anglophone concept, which in turn stigmatizes the use of non-binary forms in Francophone communities. As Chandler explains, there is a pervasive “idea that gender neutral expressions, and overall gender neutral identities are an idea from the Anglos.” Consequently, “because it’s from the Anglos,” the reaction is ““oh, no, we don't want that here.”” Juneau expresses this sentiment directly when they explain how they perceive non-binary language as “knowledge [developed] in the Anglophone world”; consequently, they hadn’t learned about non-binary identities until recently because, as a predominantly French-speaking person, “I didn’t have access to Anglophone communities.” It was only through their interactions with Anglophone colleagues at their workplace who used singular *they/them* pronouns that Juneau became familiar with non-binary language in general, though they “had never heard” non-binary French before another workplace colleague introduced them to it. This stigma against perceived Anglicization has deep roots in Québec (Walsh 2016), stretching back to its colonial history and the oppression of French-speakers under British rule (Ward 2009). As Juneau explains, “There's a huge, huge power relation between francophone[s] and anglophones,” where anglophones have historically held power under which they have subjugated francophones.

Juneau: Francophones in Quebec know what it is to fight for something because we fight, we have a long history of fighting to keep uh our culture, our language, our religion, from the English colonization...but while we fought for that, anglophones in United States [sic], the rest of Canada and around the world was [sic] fighting against HIV or racism and... so I feel that because we fought for just existing, now we're fighting for the same recognition and equality that...happen [sic] earlier in history.

Under Juneau’s account, the comparative lack of terminology for LGBT+ issues in Québec French is a result of limited social resources, which were spent elsewhere during the fight against British colonialism and, for centuries after, against the anglicization of the province. The unfortunate result of these social circumstances is that, as English terms are borrowed into French to compensate for the lack of French equivalents, they become wrapped up with the negative associations toward English cultural and linguistic influence.

4.1.1. NON-BINARY FRENCH IS GENDER-AFFIRMING. Yet, despite the associated challenges with using non-binary French, participants still expressed how its existence was deeply meaningful, not only for its use as a tool for expressing one’s gender identity in their L1, but also for the sense of community it developed between interlocutors who shared the code. Non-binary French fills a lexical gap whereby participants who “didn’t have the words to name” themselves now do, which in turn provides a tremendous sense of “relief.” Likewise, the community that has developed around non-binary French has led individuals making important connections, be they in-person or online. As Juneau explains, access to non-binary French represents access to non-binary francophone community: “I read a lot, I talked to a lot... I had access to a whole new community.”

Participants who use non-binary French acknowledge that, despite the stigma they may face or the learning curve they have encountered in adopting new grammatical features into their everyday language, the sense of affirmation they feel using it makes the entire endeavor worth it. Chandler, whose hesitation in adopting non-binary French was discussed earlier, summarizes this feeling well: “I too thought [using non-binary French] would be complicated, but eventually I

realized that I needed [it] so much, and it makes me feel so comfortable that it's worth a shot at least.”

4.2. ENGLISH IS EASIER TO USE TO DESCRIBE NON-BINARY GENDER IDENTITIES, OR REFERENCE NON-BINARY INDIVIDUALS. In parallel to the perception that French has fewer resources to express one’s non-binary identity, participants also consistently expressed the comparative ease of expressing one’s non-binary identity in English, to the extent that many of them explicitly stated a preference for using English to describe themselves. Reasons cited for why English was their preferred language for discussing topics related to gender identity focused primarily on the lack of morphological gender-marking in English, and on the perception that English speakers are more familiar with—and thus, more accepting—of non-binary language in general, especially non-binary pronouns.

One reason why French-English bilinguals report that English is their preferred language for discussing gender identity is because English singular neutral *they* is less stigmatized than the equivalent singular neutral French pronouns. As Chandler elaborates,

Chandler: I have a couple of friends who were queer and non-binary and can use neutral pronouns in English. Umm [pause] and it just makes you feel much more seen, um because if you're not talking in a neutral way about yourself, and people are not talking in a neutral way about you, then it's not really talking about you.

The ability to use neutral pronouns is a significant part of self-expression. As gender is part of one’s core identity, being able to express oneself linguistically in a manner corresponding to one’s gender identity is an act of self-affirmation. This extends to the way one is hailed by others as well: If one is misgendered, either through the use of incorrect pronoun(s) or agreement markers, then a core part of one’s identity is being dismissed. In Chandler’s words, “if you're not talking in a neutral way about yourself, and people are not talking in a neutral way about you, then it's not really talking about you.” Bardot echoes Chandler’s experience, highlighting how the widespread acceptability of singular neutral *they* in English offers a linguistic resource that has no true equivalent (in terms of uptake) in French:

Bardot: We, me including, we all say that when you use *they*, it's, it's different. It's just different, 'cause *they* is so neutral, so inclusive like grammatically, by nature, you know that um, it actually shapes your, um your way of interacting with people.

Here, Bardot tries to articulate what distinguishes the experience of using singular neutral *they* in English versus using French pronouns (binary or neutral). They struggle to concretize this distinction outside of feeling that “it’s just different,” indicating that the choice to use a given pronoun to describe one’s gender identity is as much a subconscious, emotional one, as it is a conscious choice; this struggle to verbalize why given units of language express certain identities illustrates that the link between a given *gender identity* and one’s *gender pronoun(s)* is not necessarily 1:1, as two individuals using the same pronouns may have distinct gender identities. Bardot goes on to describe the specific example of one of their friends who uses the neutral pronoun *they* in English, and the binary masculine pronoun *il* in French:

Bardot: I have a friend who used *they* in English, uh although they use *il* so *he* in French, and they were assigned female. And they say that when they use *il* in French, they feel like they owe people masculinity, masculine traits, because they use *il*. So that they, they feel like they legitimate [themselves] in using *il*. You see? But as soon as they switch to

English [and] use *they*, they care less about it. They feel like [when using] *them*, *they*, they can have a female-made presentation, they can still use *they* and it's legit, versus when they're [speaking] in French and they have to use these binary pronouns and it completely shapes the way they present themselves, the way they act, the way they speak. I think we dreadfully need *iel* to become widely used...because it makes you feel like 'I can present the way I want' versus using binary pronouns.

From Bardot's anecdote, both the general language one speaks and the specific words one uses to describe themselves shape one's gender performance. Delving deeper into this, we see that using binary—in this case, masculine—French pronouns and gender-marking affects their friend's gender performance, driving them to not only embody “masculine traits,” but “feel like they owe people masculinity.” This latter point exemplifies the fact that linguistic gender performance through *conversation* by its very nature involves at least two individuals—a speaker and at least one listener—and is thus socially-driven and, to an extent, public. Because they feel that they “have to use...binary gender pronouns” when “speaking French,” due to the fact that non-binary French pronouns are not “widely used,” their linguistic gender performance in French is necessarily a binary, masculine one, which in turn affects other aspects of their extralinguistic gender performance: They “owe people masculinity.” By contrast, the non-binary linguistic resources available in English allows them a greater freedom of gender expression when using English as a code. The option to use neutral English pronouns does not compel them to act a certain way or feel as though they “owe” the world a particular gender presentation—“they can have a female presentation,” and still feel “legitimate” as a non-binary person. Thus, in a manner similar to the way Vriesendorp and Rutten's (2017) Dutch-English bilingual participants used English to index a non-heteronormative identity, we see here that English use not only *indexes* greater freedom of gender expression, but also *directly enables* greater freedom of gender expression due to the fact that it possesses a singular neutral third-person pronoun, *they*, that has no widespread equivalent in French. Bardot goes on to summarize the comparatively liberating feeling of using non-binary pronouns in English from their own point of view:

Bardot: I think people don't realize how, how much the, the impact is that they exist in English. Like the fact that people can say, 'you know what, I think I'm non-binary, I'm going to use *they*.' People are so lucky for that, to speak English and to be able to do that. Like, again in French we can do it, but it's so not well-known, like it's so at the beginning that you have to fight every single day like to use these non-binary [words], so I think it has a, it has an impact on people being able to say, 'Yes, I'm non-binary, I feel like it and I'm going to use *they*,' and then it's done [snaps fingers]. All of a sudden you can use very inclusive language, very—it's amazing. So, I think it gives the people here a possibility to be queer and be accepted and accept themselves more easily.

Though neutral pronouns were the most frequently cited reason why participants preferred using English to discuss issues of gender identity, participants also cited specific English vocabulary items that they perceived as lacking appropriate equivalents in French. Juneau discussed the particular issue of the word *queer*: “Queer is an English word...That we use a lot in French, because translating would change [its] meaning.” While there were attempts to translate *queer* into French, as “*allosexual*” or “*polysexual*,” Juneau explains that the true power of the word *queer* lies in its culturally (and linguistically) specific history in anglophone cultures as a slur that has since been reclaimed by the LGBT+ community: “it was an insult. It had an historical meaning and power, of reappropriation. And when you just translate it, that's

what you lose, the reappropriation part. The francophone community didn't have this history of...taking an insult and reappropriate it and make it like a p- pride in identity.”

Because English is perceived as having a wider vocabulary for describing gender identity while simultaneously lacking a morphological gender-marking system, it is consequently seen as an easier language to use when describing non-binary issues. Importantly, we see this perception shared among participants regardless of their self-described proficiency in English. Though they are on opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of amount of time speaking French versus English, both Gabrielle and Noe spoke to the comparative ease with which they can use non-binary language in English versus French. Though Noe spends almost all of their time speaking French and professed that they are not very “used to” speaking English in general, they find that English is still easier for them to speak about their gender identity: “It’s easier in English cause not all the ending [sic] of words. I really like it better [laughs] for, like, that kind of stuff.” Gabrielle, though they primarily speak English, has had similar experiences with their non-binary friends and the broader trans community. For them, even amongst francophone non-binary people, there’s a tendency to speak English because “it’s so much easier.”

5. Discussion. This paper has discussed non-binary French-English bilinguals’ metalinguistic reflections on using French and English to describe issues of gender identity, especially pertaining to their own non-binary identities. My major finding is that participants overwhelmingly find English to be a more gender-neutral language than French and thus more accommodating for discussing issues of gender identity. I refer to participants’ preferences for using English to discuss their gender identities as *binary-constrained code-switching*, because the French-English bilinguals interviewed here *intentionally code-switch into English when discussing topics related to non-binary identity*, as they consider English to possess both more expansive lexical resources, and less restrictive grammatical (gender) features. Moreover, participants were conscious of these topic-induced switches during our metalinguistic interviews. Participants explicitly described their own code-switches as motivated by a positive view of English, and a negative view of (standard) French; they described English as having plentiful linguistic resources for discussing non-binary gender identity and queer issues, while they perceived French as lacking relevant vocabulary to discuss non-binary gender identity, in addition to possessing morphological gender-marking features that participants felt restricted their linguistic gender expression to normative (masculine-feminine) modes.

In the first part of my results, I found that participants articulated a dispreference for using French to describe both queer issues broadly, and non-binary issues specifically. To the first point, participants focused on the specific cultural history of Québec as a former British colony as having a lasting negative influence on intra-provincial attitudes towards perceived Anglicisms, a category which several participants described non-binary language in general as belonging to. In other words, because many francophone Quebecers see non-binary language as from the “Anglos,” it is stigmatized alongside other Anglicisms. Because these prescriptivist attitudes have stigmatized non-binary French, participants feel that, when speaking French, they are expected to gender themselves in ways that subscribe to normative grammatical rules, but which are disassociated from participants’ actual social genders. Thus, while many study participants expressed positive attitudes toward the liberatory potential of non-binary French, they felt effectively blocked from using it except under specialized circumstances—chiefly, with other non-binary francophones in their “community” who had also overcome barriers to accessing information on this still relatively little-known and minoritized variety.

Having established participants' attitudes toward French, I then examined their experiences using English. Many participants expressed the feeling that English was a more “neutral” language than French, for two primary reasons: The perception that singular *they* is widely accepted by anglophones, and the lack of morphological gender-marking in English. To the first point, while non-gendered French third-person singular pronouns have been created by the non-binary community (c.f. *iel, ille* etc.; see Knisely 2020), participants expressed frustration at the ongoing stigma toward these forms. The second point—the comparative freedom English afforded participants through its lack of morphological gender-marking—further highlights the fundamental link between perceptions of *grammatical gender* and *social gender* (See also Alpheratz 2018a; Corwin 2009; Parker 2017). These results further point to English language usage as a *style* indexing non-binary *gender identity*, as opposed to ethno-linguistic (i.e., *French–* or *Anglo–Canadian*) background (Auer 2005).

These data have important ramifications for future research on both non-binary varieties in general, and on non-binary French in particular. Though activists are raising awareness about the existence and usage of non-binary French (e.g. Ashley 2020; Alpheratz 2018), data on when and where speakers use—and *don't* use—non-binary French will help to both shape linguistic policy reforms and create educational resources on non-binary French forms. Furthermore, while Cheshire and Gardner-Chloros (1998) maintained that sex-based differentiation in code-switching is context-specific rather than monolithic or biologically-determined, linguistic patterns among non-binary speakers further challenge the traditional unidimensional focus on biological sex in linguistic studies (i.e. Chambers 1992). Though the present study is limited in scope, it indicates that further research into non-binary individuals' code-switching behaviors offers revelatory insights into not just how we approach social (esp. gendered) issues in code-switching (c.f. Gal 1978), but how we characterize the relationship between grammatical gender and social gender in general.

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