

Workshop report: Gender-inclusive language and what it means for the Modern Foreign Languages classroom

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On 3 March 2021 the Department of Languages and Cultures at Lancaster University hosted a workshop on gender-inclusive language in the languages classroom, which was attended by over 200 teachers from across the UK and beyond.

The aims of the workshop were twofold:

- To introduce participants to current debates about and approaches to gender-inclusive language in Chinese, French, German, Italian and Spanish-speaking societies
- To discuss implications for the teaching and assessment practices in Modern Foreign Languages, to share practice and recommendations

The discussions were guided by four questions:

1. What is gender-inclusive language?
2. Why does it matter for the classroom?
3. What does it mean for languages with grammatical gender?
4. How does it work in the languages classroom?

This workshop report provides a brief snapshot of the discussions surrounding these four lead questions as well as a list of useful language-specific resources.

1. What is gender-inclusive language?

The United Nations define [gender-inclusive language](#) as “speaking and writing in a way that does not discriminate against a particular sex, social gender or gender identity, and does not perpetuate gender stereotypes” and consider the use of gender-inclusive language “a powerful way to promote gender equality and eradicate gender bias.”

2. Why does it matter for the classroom?

If we want our classrooms to be safe and inclusive spaces and our teaching to reflect reality, it is important to be mindful of issues surrounding equality, diversity and inclusion. In his article [“Gender-inclusive language in German teaching”](#), Dr Steffen Kaupp from the Goethe-Institut Boston explains a range of reasons why gender-inclusive language in the MFL classroom matters. These include:

- “Languages, and therefore language learning, are closely linked to identity.”
- “A gender-inclusive use of language is closely linked to broader discussions about gender and gender identity.”

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- “one of our most important tasks as teachers is to create a learning atmosphere in which all learners feel represented.”

3. What does it mean for languages with grammatical gender?

In languages with [grammatical gender](#), we typically have to work with gendered nouns, i. e. nouns which carry inherent or explicit gender markers. Take e. g. a language like German, which has three grammatical genders. While grammatical gender does not necessarily reflect or correlate with social gender, a particular issue are nouns that refer to people, such as job titles. A sentence like “The students are there” could be translated as “Die Studenten sind da.”. The noun *Studenten* is the plural of *der Student*, the masculine form of “student”. In German, the masculine plural form has long been used as a ‘neutral’ or ‘default’ form called the ‘generic masculine’.

If we want to move away from the idea that the masculine is the ‘neutral’ or ‘generic’ form, then we need to identify and start using different options – which can be tricky in languages, where a ‘neutral’ form per se doesn’t exist. Here are some options that have been proposed for German:

- Die Studenten sind da. (generic masculine)
- Die Studentinnen und Studenten sind da. (stating the feminine and masculine form)
- Die StudentInnen sind da.
- Die Student_innen sind da.
- Die Student:innen sind da.
- Die Student*innen sind da.
- Die Studierenden sind da.



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The versions with added symbols such as the underscore (_), the colon (:), or the asterisk (*) are nowadays used by a number of major companies or cultural organisations. The added symbols are meant to overcome the binary divide and be inclusive of non-binary or gender-fluid people. In spoken language, it has been proposed that a glottal stop is used.

Such proposals have been developed for a number of other languages. The following examples from Spanish, where gendered nouns are usually marked by specific vowels, illustrate different solutions to the same problem:

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- Los chicos están aquí. (generic masculine)
- Los chicos y las chicas están aquí. (stating the feminine and masculine form)
- Los chicos/las chicas están aquí. (stating the feminine and masculine form)
- L@s chic@s están aquí.
- Les chiques están aquí.
- Lxs chicxs están aquí.



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https://www.flickr.com/photos/brocco_lee/5753687553/sizes/l/

But the problem doesn't only affect nouns alone... In gendered languages we can find traces of gender in many different grammatical contexts. The following, admittedly somewhat contrived, sentence shows how German, French and Italian tend to use masculine forms as a default, not just when it comes to nouns but also in pronouns (including indefinite pronouns and relative pronouns) and adjectives.

If there is someone who's already finished, **they** can come and see me.

Wenn es jemanden gibt, **der** schon fertig ist, dann kann **er** zu mir kommen.

S'il y a quelqu'**un** qui est déjà prêt, **il** peut venir me voir.

Se c'è qualcuno che è già pronto, può venire a trovarmi.

With regards to **non-binary and gender-neutral pronouns**, we are somewhat lucky that in English we have a contender for a pronoun that we can use in a gender-neutral way: *they*. Singular *they* has been around for a long time, being used in anaphoric reference (i.e. referring back to a previously mentioned person) and also as a pronoun that can be used for non-binary people.

Unfortunately, not all languages have an already existing pronoun at the disposal, so new pronouns need to be created. The [success story of the Swedish pronoun *hen*](#) is a great example that such initiative can gather momentum. The next generation of Swedish speakers might not even know or realise anymore that *hen* was a new creation.

But it's not just languages with grammatical gender that face challenges and have to come up with new solutions. Mandarin Chinese, a language that is largely gender neutral from a grammatical point of view, has only one third-person singular pronoun, which can mean *he*, *she* or *it*: “tā”. However, when written, different characters are used for this pronoun and these characters are gender-specific: the masculine form (‘he’) is 他 and the feminine form (‘she’) is 她. While they both characters have a common component (也), they also have a

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gendered radical. As a gender-neutral alternative “X也” with “X” as a radical [has been proposed](#), or alternatively the use of the Pīnyīn version (Romanised transcription) *tā*.

4. How does it work in the languages classroom?

During the workshop, we split into language-specific focus groups to discuss in greater depth how gender-inclusive and gender-neutral language could be used successfully in the classrooms and what the limitations may be. The list of resources below offers some language-specific insights and ideas.

A commonly shared concerns related to the question whether examination boards would accept gender-inclusive forms and non-binary pronouns in assessments. One of the teachers who attended the workshop has written a very insightful blog post on this with concrete examples and suggestions: [“Inclusive language in MFL: what exam boards need to do next”](#).

An AQA representative, who was present during the workshop, tried to alleviate such concerns, and AQA later [tweeted](#): “AQA is actively planning for gender-inclusive language forms to be included in future mark schemes. We are committed to diversity and inclusion in all aspects of our activities.”

Pearson Edexcel’s Languages Subject Advisor Alistair Drewery also [tweeted](#) regarding the matter: “Pearson Edexcel is committed to assessments that are appropriate, effective, and relevant for all learners. We’ve already been in touch with Sascha [Stollhans from Lancaster University] and will soon be producing guidance on the use of gender inclusive language”

We would like to thank all participants for the inspiring and very productive suggestions, ideas and discussions! The discussions were continued (and are still being continued!) on Twitter – do take a look at the hashtag [#InclusiveMFL](#), which teachers have been using since the workshop to share thoughts, ideas and materials.

The workshop was led by Sascha Stollhans (formally Senior Teaching Associate in German Studies and DeLC’s Schools Engagement and Outreach Officer, now Associate Professor of Language Pedagogies at the University of Leeds) in collaboration with Student Recruitment Officer Joanna Gray and DeLC colleagues Dr Aiqing Wang (Chinese Studies), Romain Bardot, Dr Isabelle Baron and Cyrille Rollet (French Studies), Dr Emily Spiers (German Studies), Dr Elena Polisca (Italian Studies), Dr Alana Jackson and María Caballero López (Spanish Studies).

Language specific resources shared by DeLC tutors and participants:

Chinese

- https://nonbinary.wiki/wiki/Pronouns#Chinese_neutral_pronouns
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_neutrality_in_genderless_languages#Chinese
- https://nonbinary.wiki/wiki/Gender_neutral_language#Chinese

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- <https://www.arianalife.com/topics/gender-equality/x%E4%B9%9Fand-ta-the-gradual-rise-of-gender-neutral-pronouns-in-chinese/>
- <https://benjamins.com/catalog/scl.13.06li>

French

- https://www.univ-tlse3.fr/medias/fichier/manuel-decriture_1482308453426-pdf
- https://nonbinary.wiki/wiki/Gender_neutral_language#French
- https://nonbinary.wiki/wiki/Glossary_of_French_gender_and_sex_terminology
- <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/11/inclusive-writing-france-feminism/545048/>
- <https://www.connexionfrance.com/French-news/Nonbinary-pronoun-they-sparks-French-language-debate-after-Merriam-Webster-word-of-the-year-nonbinary>
- https://nonbinary.wiki/wiki/Pronouns#French_neutral_pronouns

German

- <https://www.goethe.de/ins/nz/de/kul/mag/21967217.html>
- <https://www.annaheger.de/pronomen40/>
- <https://geschicktgendern.de/>
- https://www.goethe.de/resources/files/pdf187/qp-didaktisierung_interaktiv2.pdf
- <https://www.frauenbeauftragte.uni-muenchen.de/genderkompetenz/sprache/index.html>
- https://nonbinary.wiki/wiki/Gender_neutral_language_in_German
- https://nibi.space/geschlechtsneutrale_sprache
- https://nonbinary.wiki/wiki/Pronouns#German_neutral_pronouns

Italian

- http://www.funzionepubblica.gov.it/sites/funzionepubblica.gov.it/files/documenti/Normativa%20e%20Documentazione/Dossier%20Pari%20opportunit%C3%A0/lingua_ggio_non_sessista.pdf
- <https://www.tdm-magazine.it/linguaggio-inclusivo-in-italiano-guida-pratica/>
- <https://italianoinclusivo.it/scrittura/>
- <https://pennablu.it/linguaggio-inclusivo/>
- https://nonbinary.wiki/wiki/Gender_neutral_language#Italian
- <https://www.aboutranslation.com/2011/03/gender-neutrality-in-italian.html>
- <https://timeforequality.org/dossier-women-and-the-judiciary-in-italy/gender-in-language/>
- https://nonbinary.wiki/wiki/Pronouns#Italian_neutral_pronouns

Spanish

- Padlet created by one of the participants:
<https://padlet.com/alipalomolopez/br2susbmhxlh4n04>

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- <https://www.edicionesgodot.com.ar/libros/la-lengua-en-disputa-un-debate-sobre-el-lenguaje-inclusivo/>
- https://elpais.com/elpais/2020/12/04/eps/1607072645_532834.html
- <https://neiljones.org/2020/05/05/que-es-latinx/>
- [La lengua en disputa. Beatriz Sarlo y Santiago Kalinowski. Modera Cecilia Fanti.](#)
- <https://elgatoylajaja.com/la-lengua-degenerada>
- https://nonbinary.wiki/wiki/Gender_neutral_language_in_Spanish
- <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/gender-neutral-spanish-pronoun-some-elle-word-n1242797>
- <https://blog.pimsleur.com/2020/05/13/gender-neutral-language-spanish/>
- https://nonbinary.wiki/wiki/Pronouns#Spanish_neutral_pronouns